SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

June 11, 2023

*Blessing and Promise* Genesis 12:1-9

In those moments when we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that this story of the call of Abram is a little bit…irritating. Be honest, now. Is it not at least a little irritating to hear, once again, of Abram, this sterling character of faithfulness and obedience? This “eager beaver” go-getter who, at the drop of a hat, obeys God’s command to uproot his family, and sets out without once hesitating or making excuses? Is not even one us here at least a little intimidated by Abram’s total loyalty and devotion?

Abram does not even consider his own age—we are told that he is seventy-five when God calls him. Many of us would point to that bit of personal reality as reason enough not to be so accommodating, even to God.

Not Abram. God hardly has to do much more than tap him on the shoulder, and crook his finger at him, and Abram is off like a shot: packing up his family and all of his possessions—all his household goods, all his livestock, his wife Sarai, his orphaned nephew, Lot, and yes, their slaves. He packs up them, too. He packs up everything he owns and hits the road—and he did this during a time when “hitting the road” was not at all easy.

Indeed, “hitting the road” could mean all kinds of hardship and danger—from bandits, possibly from hostile native inhabitants of the land you were traveling through. There were few places for respite—maybe a small town or two. There probably weren’t any roads, maybe a few worn trails, but not something paved and easy to travel on, especially with a big group of people and animals.

Finding a well or another water source to satisfy the needs of his household and the livestock would have been a daily problem to be solved. Or there may have been too much rain, or too much heat, or cold, or wind, or fire—you name it. There may not have been enough wild game, or not enough wild vegetation along the way to feed everyone. There were also hills to climb and rivers to cross, and everyone needed to be kept together, all of the time.

Unlike any one of us, and even unlike many of the other people we meet in the Bible, Abram is not daunted or restrained by any of this. He does not even once ask a question—at least none that are recorded for us. What he heard from God is enough.

What Abram heard was God’s promises to him, and that is enough. Abram heard God promise that he will have what is nearest and dearest to his heart. God promised Abram that he and Sarai will have children, and a land of their own to live in and raise them.

What Abram hears is the promise of a different future than he had envisioned for himself. Abram heard God promise that his life it going to be fulfilling. His life is going to be full of every good thing he has longed for. It is like his whole life is being to be restarted. Even redeemed for something new and hope filled.

Most of us here in this Sanctuary are not totally unfamiliar with Abram’s response to such a promise, or such a hope. Most of us have, just a couple of generations back, relatives who did about the same thing. They took the same kind of chance that Abram did, and for many of the same reasons—they were looking for a new start. They were hoping for a different future than what they could see for themselves where they were. I dare say: the stories of millions of peoples in the Americas are quite similar to Abram’s.

What makes Abram’s story so very different, and intimidating, is his motivation. Yes, he is after many of the same things that our own ancestors were after. However, what makes him different is the way in which he receives God’s invitation and promise. He trusts God so immediately, so completely. We were never told about the preparations he made before he set out. We only hear of how he immediately left his father’s house. We marvel, and rightly so, at how Abram takes God at God’s word without needing anymore prompting, proof, or persuasion. We admire his faith, his certainty that God will provide.

 It *is* admirable. It is also intimidating if not downright irritating. We read his story and inwardly, we shudder a little, and wonder how we measure up. Or we shrug it off as a story so ancient that it cannot possibly speak to our life here in this place in the year of our Lord, 2023. Really, how could it?

The bad news is that neither reaction is helpful because neither is faithful, and neither is faithful because neither is fulfilling. The good news is that God’s call is always to fulfillment; it is always a call to be blessed and to be a blessing.

Perhaps it was the promise of the blessing that so quickly persuaded Abram. As I hope you noticed, the future God promises Abram is a blessing, but the blessing is not only for himself and his family.

What is especially important about the blessing that he is offered is that God promises that in Abram “*all* the families of the earth shall be blessed.” [v.3] Not just him and his, but *all* families. What is more, God did not specify how long this blessing was going to last. God did *not* *specify* the number of generations to be blessed—that part was left wide open, and it can include all of us here, too.

Not only is God’s call left open to us, but it can happen anywhere and under any circumstance. For example, last week the Sunday School went on a “mission trip” to Wisconsin, last week. We did it by zoom. We visited with a friend of mine from seminary, Pastor Moira Finley who took us on a tour of the place where we sent a whole bunch of baby and toddler sized socks—250 pairs. We sent them to the clothing “store” her church runs. As they call it a “store”, however, they do not sell clothes. They give them away to people in need. Their “store” takes up the whole basement of the church—which is about two-thirds the size of our church Sanctuary.

Moira told us that there are many people who come through the rural area, where she pastors, to work in the harvests. They are seasonal workers who work for some of the lowest wages in the country, and so they are always in need of necessities. She told us they also have people from the nearby Native American reservation who come to “shop.” We only sent the socks in April, and they are, all 250 pairs, are already all gone.

When we asked her how the store got started, she told us of a member of the church who came to her about fifteen years ago. Her name was Bonnie, and she was raising her granddaughter alone on what little income she had.

When Bonnie went to Moira, it was because she had been out trying to purchase clothes for her granddaughter, only to find that there were no clothes to be found that she could afford. Rather than ask for money to purchase clothes, she told Moira, she “to;d” her pastor, Moira, that they were going to have a children’s clothing swap-meet there at the church. Bonnie spoke to a couple of other families who put the word out. They had their children’s clothing exchange, but soon they found themselves also collecting clothes of all sorts and sizes for everyone from babies to adults. (BTW: Moira tells us that the hardest clothes to come-by are men’s slacks. It seems men are less likely to give up their slacks until they are completely worn out!)

In case you missed it: there was a call story in there and it started with one grandmother who had a need she felt for her granddaughter, her family. The first clothing exchange blessed one child who was loved, but it has also become a ministry that has blessed many more beloved children. In fact, it now blesses several communities. Bonnie’s call was born of love. God answered with a love that grew even bigger than one grandchild and that, perhaps, is where we can come back to Abram and his irritating story.

Perhaps we could allow Abram to be an exception, a spiritual superstar, a holy overachiever whose story of faithfulness and obedience is writ large, not so that we would match him, but so that we might be inspired to emulate him *in our own way*, and *in our own context*.

Mostly, though, I suspect that we are meant to take very seriously the part about the blessing that God promised Abram. It is the same blessing that God continues to promise us. God’s blessing is for our wholeness and healing, and for our living and thriving, but there is more, much more.

When God opens our hearts to the blessing God has for us, what we begin to notice is that God’s way is to always bless others, to transform others’ lives, whole categories of communities of others. The nature of God is to transform, to lift all people up from need to fullness, from lack to abundance.

What this means is that the story I told you about the clothing ministry in Wisconsin is good, but it is also limiting. In fact, I am going to be bold enough to say that it is even a dead end for the people who are receiving the clothes and the congregation that supports the store. This is because giving people clothes does not change their condition. It only makes it a bit more bearable.

So, it is a dead end for both groups…if that is as far as the work goes,…if that is the limit of God’s Spirit among us…but what if more is going on? What if more than clothes are being changed? What if there is at least one person—because that is often all it takes—one person who not only participates in this ministry, but also begins to love the people who are being served.

What kind of promise and blessing might God speak to such a person? Might such a child, or a grandmother or grandfather (because, remember, age does not let us off the hook)—perhaps one person will begin their own journey with God into new places and new levels of compassion and new kinds of action that changes the future for the good.

Perhaps Abram’s story is not so intimidating after all. I hope it is not—not for any of us. In fact, my prayer for us is that each of us, and also all of us together, will revisit Abram’s story often. I hope we will rejoice with him when God’s blessing and promise comes into his life. I hope we will be proud of his eager response. Most of all, I hope we will eagerly receive the blessing and promise that God has for us; that we will make ourselves ready, and that we will step out on a new journey with God. God bless us as we ponder this. Amen.