

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
 Lent 2A 2017
 Genesis 12: 1-4a
 March 12, 2017

“Listening” is our theme throughout Lent, and this week we are listening to what is probably the most well-known Christian scripture, the text many call the Gospel in miniature, John 3:16. It’s hard to pass up the opportunity to preach on this but I’m actually going to focus on the reading from Genesis. It’s a short reading about God calling Abraham and blessing him.

For Jews, these few verses are a key to the rest of the book of Genesis, and even for the whole first 5 books of the Bible, the Torah—the most significant scripture for the Jewish people. So, just like John 3:16 is the Gospel in miniature, these 4 verses in Genesis capture God’s relationship with God’s people in miniature. It’s the Spark Notes of the Old Testament. God chooses. God calls. God promises blessing. People respond.

But you might be surprised to hear that, for the early church, this was also a key scripture. Why would this be so important for the early church?

We know that Jesus was Jewish, and that most of his first followers were also Jewish. So, in the first years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Christianity, or the Way as it was known, was an offshoot of Judaism. But Paul really pushed the envelope and called into question the idea that only Jews could follow Jesus. The central issue in these first years was about whether the Gospel was meant for Gentiles—non-Jews—too.

So, this story of God blessing the *whole world* through Abraham became the pivot story for the early church. Yes, God chose the Jewish people but it was as an instrument for reaching the whole world—not an exclusive relationship.

I believe this is also a story that connects so well with where we are right now. We’re listening to God’s blessing of us, and we’re hearing that blessing as a call to be a blessing for the world.

I’ve preached on blessing before—and even though I have, I still have a hard time defining “blessing”. It’s so easy to think of it as all those things that we label as “good”: health, a new baby, a decent job, a home, loving relationships, enough money not to worry. Those definitely feel like blessings when we have them. But I’m not so sure “blessing” is that simple.

The very challenging question for me is who gets blessings and why. And what about all those people who are struggling with serious illness or who are lonely or unemployed or living in a war zone? Did God just decide they weren’t worthy of blessing?

This story of the blessing of Abraham doesn’t completely answer those questions but it does speak to them. We don’t know exactly why God chooses Abraham. It certainly isn’t because he’s got it all together and is morally perfect. If you read a little further in Genesis, you’ll see how flawed he is.

God chooses Abraham at a moment of great uncertainty, not when his life was together. His father, Terah, has just died. They’re in the middle of a journey. One of Abraham’s brothers has died. His wife, Sarah, is infertile. He has an orphaned nephew, Lot, who he’s responsible for. This is when the word of God comes, the promise of blessing.

There are a lot of things that are unclear in this story. We don't know why God chose Abraham—rather than someone else. We don't know why God chose Abraham at this particular moment.

But we *do* know God's purpose in choosing Abraham as the one to be blessed. This is *not* a reward for super-faithfulness. This is *not* a sign that God loves Abraham more than anyone else. God is blessing Abraham so that Abraham and his descendants can be God's *instruments*—so that through *them* God can bless the whole world. “Blessed to be a blessing” is the shorthand way of saying it.

So, getting back to the question of what exactly is meant by the word “blessing”. It's a word that is used a lot in the book of Genesis—88 times to be exact—and it is always a gift of God that results in goodness and well-being. This can be material well-being but it can also be a sense of peace and security. In Hebrew, the word signifies “*flourishing*”.

I like that word. I like it because it sounds like what it is. There's life and energy in that word. And there's a sense of growing, of the blessing not being contained.

I'd like to share a couple of stories that might stretch our sense of what a blessing looks like. The first is a story that caught my eye on the business page of the paper. I love the title: “Moving from pot to grass pulls a young District man out of the weeds.” It's the story of a 25 year-old businessman, Jerell Brown who is the owner of SML Services. SML stands for Save My Lawn. The landscaping company is in its third year and has five employees, 80 residential clients and 2 commercial ones. Last year, Brown took home \$50,000.

But Jerell's first business venture was selling cigars in middle school. Most of those profits went to his mom for food. Then he moved into the marijuana business which he continued several years past high school to supplement the other low-paying jobs he had.

One night, everything came crashing down when he was arrested and spent 5 days in the DC jail. Brown says that was his wake-up call. During 8 months of house arrest while he was awaiting sentencing, he listened to motivational tapes from his boss at the restaurant where he had worked. He completed a slew of online training programs. He started a music review magazine.

At his sentencing, the judge gave him an immediate month in jail and 2 years' probation. During his month of jail time, Brown used that time to think through how to get a legal business started. And that's exactly what he did one month later.

This story was on the business page rather than the religion page, so blessing wasn't a part of the vocabulary. But as I hear this story, I hear a lot of blessing. I hear it in the innate gifts Brown has for business. I hear it in the wake up call Brown got from his 5 days in jail. I hear it in his boss giving him motivational tapes and Brown using that time of house arrest and even his jail time, so productively. A whole lot of flourishing happened in that time.

My take on this is that Brown experienced the blessing. And somehow, he knew that he was blessed to be a blessing. He's doing just that. He got a business going that not only gives him an income but provides jobs for five people. Flourishing.

The next story comes from Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer who had just successfully gotten his client released after 50 years of jail time for a crime he committed as a juvenile. He's walking the hallways of

the New Orleans' courthouse when an elderly woman motions for him to come over. Stevenson recognizes her as someone who had been in the courtroom so he asks her if she's related to his client.

"No, I'm not related. I just come here to help people. This is a place full of pain, so people need plenty of help around here."

"Well, that's really kind of you," Stevenson said.

"No, it's what I'm supposed to do, so I do it." She paused for a moment. "My 16 year old grandson was murdered 15 years ago, and I loved that boy more than life itself."

Grabbing Stevenson's hand, she said, "I grieved and I grieved. I asked the Lord why he let someone take my child like that. He was killed by some other boys. I came to this courtroom for their trials and sat there and cried every day for nearly two weeks. None of it made any sense. Those boys were found guilty for killing my grandson, and the judge sent them away to prison forever. I thought it would make me feel better but it actually made me feel worse."

She was sitting in the courtroom after the sentencing, crying, and a woman came over, gave her a hug and asked if the boys who got sentenced were her children. She explained that the boy they killed was her grandchild.

"I think she sat with me for almost 2 hours. It felt good to finally have someone to lean on at that trial, and I've never forgotten that woman. I don't know who she was, but she made a difference."

So, about a year later, this elderly woman started coming to the courthouse so that she could be someone hurting people could lean on. She first looked for people who had lost someone to murder. But then she saw how some of the ones grieving the most were the people whose children or parents were on trial, so she just started letting anybody lean on her who needed it.

This is how she describes her calling: "All these young children being sent to prison forever, all this grief and violence. Those judges throwing people away like they're not even human, people shooting each other, hurting each other like they don't care. It's a lot of pain. I decided that I was supposed to be here to catch some of the stones people cast at each other."

God has clearly blessed this woman with an extraordinary amount of compassion and courage. She has responded to that blessing by being a font of indiscriminate compassion in a place full of pain. Flourishing. In that New Orleans Courthouse, compassion is flourishing. Blessed to be a blessing.

As I said earlier, this story of Abraham is a good one for us right now. Here, in this place, we are being blessed in so many ways—there's a lot of life and creativity. We're not huge but we have a huge percentage of people for whom this community is a very important part of their lives. We are willing to share our time and our talents and our money. We are willing to share our faith—we are trusting that God really has brought all of this together for a reason--that we are flourishing, so that we can be instruments of blessing in the world.

We are getting started on a new journey. We don't know exactly what it will look like. But we can trust that God will equip us with every blessing we need to get there because that's who God is.

Thanks be to God. Amen.