

Sermon for Sunday, March 16, 2014 Lent 2 Genesis 12:1-4a "Blessing"

The creators of the lectionary, that calendar of readings from Scripture that guides what we hear each Sunday, sometimes make some choices that cause us to scratch our heads.

The Gospel readings in this season of Lent are not the problem. They march along, telling the story about how Jesus got so very crosswise with the political and religious power structure of his time, how radical his teachings were, and how finally he was killed by those whose power was threatened by him. The Epistle readings, similarly, contain instructions and correctives for the communities who tried to follow Jesus' way but somehow went off track and started doing things that were in fact sinful. That all makes sense – we learn about how Jesus tried to rebuild the covenant between God and God's people, and how they didn't always get it right. But the old testament readings – ah, there's the part where we sometimes wonder what was in the minds of the lectionary designers.

Last week was pretty straightforward. We heard all about Eve, and humanity's first instance of failing to follow God's instructions. Since we are in this season of penitence, of figuring out how we ourselves have gone astray, talking about what may have been the first sin seems logical. But then we come to this week's reading from the Hebrew Bible, once again from the book of Genesis, and we wonder what the lectionary folks were thinking about.

For here we have the story of God's instruction to our primeval forebear Abraham, that he should gather his family, such as it was, and get moving to some unnamed place. God tells Abraham that if he goes, "I [God] will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing."

Just like last week, God is giving an instruction. This time it's not about trees and fruit, it's about going somewhere. Sort of the same, sort of different. But an instruction nonetheless. And there are consequences. Whereas in the story of the tree and the fruit and the snake, God has instructed that if the humans eat the fruit, they shall die – a negative consequence – in this story of God's command to Abraham there's a positive consequence. Go where I tell you and I will bless you so that you will be a blessing. I guess God read the books about behavioral psychology which assert that positive reinforcement works better than negative reinforcement...the negative certainly didn't seem to work in the garden of Eden.

I will bless you and so that you will be a blessing. What does it mean?

Clearly getting blessed is a good thing, a positive reinforcement. We love to be blessed, whether it is our parent saying "I'm so proud of you!" or our boss saying "Good job on the Foofram presentation today!" or our God saying "this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased."

But what about the second half of the sentence; "so that you will be a blessing?" What does it mean to be a blessing, and what does it have to do with Lent? Perhaps the first place to start is to figure out what the word blessing means. It's certainly a word that gets used a lot in this little passage. The word berakah, or blessings, occurs five times in two lines. God wants to make sure that Abraham knows without the shadow of a doubt that the consequences of following God's command will be not only good, but five times good. Blessing upon blessing upon blessing upon blessing upon blessing.

And it's a blessing that moves from the individual blessing of Abraham to the blessing of his marriage to the blessing of his family, the family that hasn't been born yet, to the blessing of all the world...because God's blessing at the start is eventually spread throughout all the world because of Abraham.

God gives this extraordinary blessing – nowhere else in the Bible does God use this kind of repetitive blessing formula – and how does Abraham respond? Does he deliver a powerful speech in response to what God has said? Does he make a whole bunch of promises back to God outlining how Abraham will keep his part of the bargain?

Here's what the book of Genesis says: "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him."

He just gets up and does what God told him to do. Doesn't question it, although it is a pretty shocking thing for God to demand. Doesn't say "okay, but let me take care of a few things first." Doesn't do anything except just do what God said.

And that, as we hear in the letter to the Romans, is faith. Abraham doesn't question God's command. He just does it. And he does it even though it seems sort of crazy. But he trusts God's promises.

And he most likely isn't really sure what God means when God says "you will be a blessing." Does it mean he will be a good father, even though he is 100 and not yet a father? Does it mean that he will be a model of righteousness for the whole world? We haven't even heard the word righteousness yet in the Bible, so he may not think in those terms. Perhaps it means all of these things, or just simply that Abraham will be a good man that can make a difference in the world. Abraham doesn't know for sure, and God doesn't give any further definition. And despite the lack of clarity, Abraham still goes. Because he has faith in God. He trusts that God will lead him on this journey, and in his life.

So now we get to the part where we think about how this fits into Lent. We're in a very different place than Abraham, and not just because we're in Richmond and not in Haran, or because that was several millennia ago and this is 2014. We know a whole lot more about God than Abraham did. After all, we have the benefit of a holy book, the Bible, which is conveniently translated into English. We have the benefit of Jesus Christ, God's son, who came to help us know God better. We have the benefit of teachers and preachers and scholars to answer some, if not all, of our questions.

So why is it so much harder for us to believe, to have faith, than it was for Abraham? It doesn't make sense. Or at least, it doesn't make sense until we read the rest of the Bible, the rest of the story of the rocky relationship between God and God's people. Time and time again, we fail in our relationship with God because we cannot believe it's true – that God loves us in spite of all our failings, that God is with us even when things are going badly, that we are saved even when we feel utterly bereft. God gives each and every one of us not five blessings, but five hundred thousand blessings, in our lives, in a smile, in our education, in meaningful work, in our families, and still we shake our head and say "how could our creator be so good to us? It can't be true."

I could delve into the psychology of guilt and shame to try and explain why we do this, but it would take longer than we have here this morning. But I will boil it down to a very simple formula. We find it hard to believe that God loves and cares for us and blesses us because we often think we are unworthy of that love and care and blessing. We think God could not possibly give us a divine blessing because we cannot even give ourselves a blessing. All we see is our imperfection, our failure. How can we be blessed? How can we be a blessing? We are all a mess.

And thus we come to the blessing of Lent. The starting point of Lent is that we are not perfect. In fact, we are far from it. And it is good to take some time to review our lives, to see what we need to correct so that we act in the way God has created us to act. But there is a corollary to this self-examination: there is more to us than just our brokenness. We are created by a God who made us in the divine image. Not perfect, but in God's image...which means there is always good in us. And God seeks and celebrates the good in us, even as God urges us to amend that which is not good. And to have faith, even when we look deeply into our souls and don't like what we see, we have to acknowledge that God sees more than the sin. God sees the good acts. God sees the possibilities. God sees the part of us that is most like the image of God. And when we acknowledge that, we can trust in God even in times when we struggle to connect with our creator.

Lent is not only about beating ourselves up for all the ways in which we have been bad followers. Lent is also about seeing what God sees in us – the possibilities of greater holiness. Abraham had no idea what would happen when he left his family's ancestral land. All he knew was that God said it would be a good thing. We have no idea what will await us in the months and years to come. But if we trust that God truly loves us in all our complexity, then we know that God is promising that we will be blessed as Abraham was blessed, simply for believing that God will bless us. That second half of the sentence, "you will be a blessing" that we have been puzzling over? It isn't clear and that's alright. You believe and God blesses you and you are a blessing because you are the living symbol of belief, and how you are that symbol, how you are that blessing, is going to be different for each and every one of you. The only common characteristic is the most important one: you believe. And because of that, you are both blessed and blessing.

Does it mean you'll win the lottery? Most likely not. Does it mean that you'll have a whole bunch of kids and be the patriarch or matriarch of all of God's people? I doubt it. But God will bless each and every one of us in ways both commonplace and extraordinary.

So in this holy season of Lent, believe that God will bless you. Believe that you probably won't know until a blessing comes and that you probably won't be able to predict the timing or the nature of it. Believe that you may not even know when you will be a blessing, because we can't always see how we affect others. Just prepare yourself by sweeping away the doubts and demands of proof. Simply say yes to God. Get up and go. You will be blessed and you will be a blessing. Amen.