

February 28, 2021

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Genesis 12:1-5a

Blessed to Be A Blessing

Hopefully, by now you know our First Parish Church Annual Meeting is this Sunday at 10:30am. You probably know that all the boards, committees, and officers of the church provide a report of the past year. As part of my report, I'm also planning to offer a few thoughts on what might lie ahead for us.

In fact, I want to begin doing that in this sermon by looking at the story of Abram. In our reading today, God makes an incredible promise. God said, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...so that you will be a blessing." Abram was destined for greatness. Not only will he be a blessing, God said, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Blessed in order to be a blessing. To me, that's what life is about. That might be the religious life in a nutshell. God blesses each of us in order to be a blessing to others. God blesses us with financial resources, not just to enhance our own lives, but for the purpose of serving people. God blesses each of us with skills and talents, not only for our own benefit, but in order to make someone else's life a little better.

As a church, we're doing this, but I can see us taking it further in 2021. Through Abram, all the families of the earth would be blessed. It's one thing to be a blessing to our own families, or to our fellow church members, but I can see us finding new ways to be a blessing to the residents of York and beyond who we don't even know and who we may never even meet.

Now, Abram's future was incredibly bright and promising, but there was a catch. God said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Abram would be a blessing to every family of the earth, but there was something he had to do. He had to leave where he was and go to an unfamiliar place.

I'm going to suggest the same is true for First Parish Church. I believe the future of this church is bright and promising, but it might require us to leave some things behind and go to some unfamiliar places. Many of you know this from experience. The act of

leaving home and venturing into unfamiliar territory, can play a crucial role in one's spiritual development.

When I was in high school, I went to church every Sunday. I went to all the youth group meetings, but I didn't have a strong faith. It wasn't until I went off to college that my spiritual life began to blossom. I didn't really seek God until I experienced the vulnerability that came from leaving home, leaving friends, and leaving familiar surroundings.

Notice how God's instructions are worded. God told Abram to go from his country, from his extended family, and lastly, from his father's house. Each gets progressively more difficult to leave. On top of that, Abram wasn't even given an exact destination. God said, "Go! Go to the land that I will show you." In other words, just start out. Leave home and, at some point, I'll let you know when you've arrived. Imagine the faith that required!

I moved to York in late September. I researched every aspect of 178 York St. I got a virtual tour of the house. Online, I learned I could get coffee, ice cream, and pizza all within walking distance. That checked some important boxes. I don't know about you. I can live with a little bit of mystery, but I like to have things nailed down if I can.

Faith is moving into the unknown while trusting in God's provision. That's what we do as a church. We don't know what the future holds. We don't know where we're going. All we know is that we can't stay where we are. Martin Luther King said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

So, if what was true for Abram is true for our church, if God calls us to go to a new place, an unfamiliar place, I have a couple of ideas. I'm going to lose many of you as soon as I say this, but bear with me. First, this coming year, I can see us bolstering our online presence.

I think we do some really good things online and wherever you are right now, I invite you to put down whatever is in your hands and offer a round of applause for the fantastic job Pastor Dan does editing our virtual worship services. Having said that, I know that the online world is not everyone's cup of tea.

I can remember talking with a church member when I was serving my first church. I said, "I think we might want to get a website." This was over twenty years ago. The church didn't have a website. She thought for a moment and said, "I'm not sure. I'm thinking of the people in our church and I can't think of anyone who would go to our website."

I said, "Exactly!" There's a sea of people out there that live their lives on the Internet and they aren't in our church. Those are the people I want to reach." We've all known for years that a church needs to be accessible online. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it's that a church's online presence is even more important than most of us thought.

I know for a fact, many of you don't watch our worship service on Sunday morning. People are really enjoying the online flexibility. We may have people watching our worship and supporting our ministry that will never step into our building. With the use of technology, a church can be a blessing to the families of the earth in ways Abram never could.

The second place I see us locating ourselves in the coming year is amongst town groups and organizations. Prior to the pandemic, it was clear that churches can no longer wait for people to walk through our doors looking for answers to life's questions. There are too many other places to go for that. We need to go to them. We could find creative ways to partner with town organizations. We need to be out among people the way Jesus and his disciples were.

Now, I recognize this lies outside many of our comfort zones. I'm right there with you. It's hard to leave the familiar and go to a new place. We get into our routines. We like predictability. We seek the comfort of the familiar, but there is some good news here.

I've read this text a hundred times and I don't know if I've ever picked up on this. Abram doesn't leave behind everything. The text actually identifies everything Abram took with him. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions that they had gathered and all the persons whom they had acquired, presumably servants or slaves. Abram didn't leave everything behind when he went to a new place. He took with him the essentials.

I imagine Abram thinking he could deal with the uncertainty as long as he had his support system, his partner Sarai, and his nephew Lot. I can imagine it would be comforting, it would take the edge off of being in an unfamiliar land to be able to surround himself with his most prized possessions, those reminders of who he was and where he came from.

That's a beautiful thing about the spiritual life. We all go through changes. We all move from one phase of life to the next. Sometimes it's forced upon us, but we all move

into unfamiliar places. When we do, we leave some things behind, but we take the essentials with us. We don't lose our identity. We don't lose our value in God's eyes. We can take our faith with us.

When I talk about our church going to new and unfamiliar places in the coming year, I'm not talking about leaving everything behind. We're not giving up our music and our liturgy. We're not giving up our Congregational heritage. We're not giving up our traditions and ministries that are so important to us. Having a greater online presence doesn't require us to leave the things we know and love behind.

What this next year will look like for us will come down to faith. The book of Hebrews includes a roll call of people who acted in faith to bring about God's purposes. It says, "By faith [Abram whose name will be changed to Abraham] obeyed when he was called to set out...not knowing where he was going...By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised...By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old - and Sarah herself was barren...

Likewise, it will be our faith that will lead us to new places.

By faith we will continue to serve in new and important ways.

By faith we will be a blessing to our families and to this church.

By faith will be a blessing to all the families of York and beyond.

By faith we will be blessed in order to be a blessing.