

Second Sunday in Lent

OUT OF ONE, MANY

Genesis 12:1-4a

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Analysis by Martin Lohrmann

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

4So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

DIAGNOSIS:

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *"Out of Many, One"*

The transition from Genesis 11 to Genesis 12 is jarring. Genesis 11 begins with the story of the tower of Babel. People had grown great, they had one language and one purpose. Working together, they would reach for the stars and build a tower to heaven. It's a hope that many people still share today, expressed on the Great Seal of the United States and on our money: *e pluribus unum*: out of many, one. If only we work hard enough, we might yet overcome our individual weakness and our embarrassing differences to achieve greatness.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Human Plans, Divine Plans*

But God had other plans. While some interpret God's destruction of the tower of Babel as a sign that God felt threatened or was worried this ambitious human project might just work, perhaps God knew what would result from such plans. While humans think in terms of big projects that wash away individuality and leave our humble origins in the dust, God prefers our on-the-ground interesting particularities. In Genesis 11, God desires diversity and uniqueness. It is not God who is threatened by humans but humans who are afraid of being who God has created us to be—in our humility and our God-given differences.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *End of the Line*

Still, if a bland, monolithic (totalitarian) humanity is our goal, then the rest of Genesis 11 can read like further punishment. We are left to see how human ambitions, so close to reaching the heavens, can fall apart. By the end of the story of the Babel all that is left of human striving is an ever-weaker line of descent from Noah's son Shem to just a few wanderers: Terah, his son Abram, daughter-in-law Sarai and grandson Lot. This genealogy could read like the end of the Adam and Eve's holy line; the expiration of God's little experiment with the human race.

PROGNOSIS:

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Out of One, Many*

Having been so close to the heights of heaven in Genesis 11, Genesis 12 opens with a lonely and humble wanderer. This will be how the promises of God and the kingdom of heaven take root and grow. In the midst of death, there will be life. (This life will not be the kind of totalitarian vision of the world in which identity and particularity are lost, sacrificed for the good of some inhuman whole. Instead, God's promise to give God's heaven

freely will come one fragile and beloved person at a time.)

Ultimately, that promise will bear fruit in a descendent of Abraham—Jesus, who blesses a diverse and mixed up humanity, both in his life and in his death. Faithful to God's call he journeys from his home in heaven, is condemned by a state and religion that (not unlike the people of Babel) want him to conform to their expectations. When he will not, he suffers the consequences of loving God's complex world too well. Yet out of his one death, many are blessed: Out of one, many. And faithful, even in death, his Father raises him out of the silence of the grave to speak the diverse languages of mercy, grace, and peace in a world whose single preferred language is fear and hatred.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Leave Home to Find Home*

God blesses Abram and Sarai with a new home and eventually a child through whom they will have many descendants. But that will not be the ultimate blessing. The ultimate blessing is that from their walk of faith will come Jesus' walk of faith that blesses all. That walk will make it possible for future generations to leave what is familiar (as did Abram and Sarai) and, despite some major missteps along the way (and they had a few of them), walk by faith alone.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Blessed to Be a Blessing*

And as we walk by faith alone, God spreads the blessing one person at a time. God sends us out to bless others. Instead of waiting for us to fail to reach heaven on our own (and either being relieved or disappointed with us), God brings the kingdom of heaven down to us through the One who died so that we might have life. Because of him we share the good news about the One who has blessed us to be a blessing.