

Second Sunday in Lent

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

Genesis 12:1-4a

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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: Cursed

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Barren*

At the end of the primeval pre-history of humanity in Genesis 1-11, we are reminded that Sarai is barren, aged and without a child (11:30), a fate almost worse than death. To not have children to carry on your name and your memory threatened to relegate Sarai and her husband, Abram, to the dust bin of history. Without children, getting old and long past the age of childbearing, they would soon be forgotten and disappear regardless of what they might have accomplished during their lives. The sin and curse begun in Genesis 3 has spread like some insidious contagion crippling human life and fracturing human community so badly (cf. Tower of Babel) that the impending fate for Sarai and Abram is emblematic of the fate that hangs over

all of us: that we are ultimately alone, insignificant and doomed to disappear into the dust of the earth. No one will remember us. It ultimately doesn't matter whether we had even existed.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hopeless*

In response to the threat of such a fate, we scramble to reverse what seems to be inevitable. That develops later in the story of Abram and Sarai as each of them in their own way cuts corners or tries to alter their fate by trying to have children anyway even if it is unconventional and faithless (cf. Hagar and Ishmael). They will insure their significance one way or another. They are desperate to do so because the alternative is to slowly slide into obscurity and nothingness. They had already begun that slide. They had "settled" in Haran (11:31), given up on the future, and resigned themselves to living out their days in the obscurity of their nomadic life. In short, they were "hopeless." They had resigned themselves to the inevitable. There would never be children. They would never have an enduring legacy and lives that had mattered.

Are we any different? We live our lives without hope and afraid that ultimately our lives will not have mattered. We too fear that our lives will be "barren" and not have mattered. Is there anything worse than being "childless," than not being able to point to any enduring legacy or project that will keep our name from disappearing into the dust bin of history? Our hopelessness pushes us into one of two directions (and sometimes both): to even more frantically idolatrous pursuits of immortality or to giving up, resigning ourselves to this inevitable fate, and settling in Haran. Such hopelessness is ultimately giving up on God. We no longer hope because we no longer believe in a God who will give us a future. And without a future, there can be no hope.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Cursed

Even though the God of Genesis 1-11 still remained unknown to Abram and Sarai, they were in fact suffering the deadly consequences of the spread of unbelief, sin, and judgment of Genesis 1-11. Their childlessness was finally a sign of judgment. They were condemned to a fate they probably thought that they didn't deserve. But the scattering from Babel (11:1-9) and the consequent isolation, loneliness, and hopelessness is the deserved fate of a humanity that has repeatedly decided to be like God and go its own way (chapters 3-11). God as the sovereign Lord of history always has the last word. Abram and Sarai could not escape the fate of primeval history. Yet they still foolishly believed that settling in Haran was the latest stop freely chosen by wondering nomads who were always on the go, always looking for a place where they can settle into lives that matter. But the brutal truth is that God was handing them over to the fate that all the descendants of Adam and Eve deserve.

Later Abram and Sarai would have this fate interrupted by the gracious promise, blessing and rescue of God (12:1-3). That promise also had a dark side: those who cursed Abram and Sarai and the gracious God who rescued them would also be cursed. God would still have the last word. That is finally the terrible truth of the isolation, loneliness, and hopelessness that we are unable to escape in this life. It is not just a quirk of fate, the luck of the draw, or the haphazard consequences of being adrift in a godless universe. Our plight in Haran is the deserved fate of those who have turned their back on the God who graciously rescued Abram and Sarai. Our faithlessness has deadly consequences. "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse." That is the cursed fate that is ours apart from Christ and his promise. It is the fate no one ever wants to face.

PROGNOSIS: Blessed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Blessing*

The sovereign Lord of creation cannot abandon the creation that has gradually spiraled out of control. Genesis 3-11 has recorded that dreadful story. Even though God finally confused and scattered a humanity whose arrogance had gotten out of control at Babel, God cannot leave the world in this broken and desperate plight. God loves that world too much. God looks at the barrenness of humanity symbolized by the barrenness of Abram and Sarai and decides to begin a new creation. Just as the Word of God as sheer gift and grace brought a world into being out of nothingness (Gen. 1), so also again God speaks a Word that is sheer gift and grace. Once that word had interrupted chaos. Now that word interrupts the barrenness of Abram and Sarai. God himself reverses the curse. God takes the initiative, reverse his own curse and offers this barren couple an abundant blessing: a land, children that one day will be as numerous as the stars of the heavens (15:5). It will be a legacy that will never be forgotten. It will be a legacy that will also bless the world. There are no conditions or limitations attached to this promise. There are no riders or qualifying conditions. And the consequences will flow to the ends of the earth. The division and isolation that had splintered humanity at Babel will one day be healed and reversed. The cosmos will be returned to Eden. Abram and Sarai have been blessed to be a blessing.

This unilateral and gracious promise with no strings attached foreshadows the unilateral, unconditional, and gracious promise of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Determined to have the last word God sends his Son, the definitive fulfillment of the promise to Abram and Sarai to bear the curse "for us and our salvation." We are not condemned to the dust bin of history. As the ultimate child of promise Christ willingly bears our cursed fate for us and dies alone, isolated, barren, condemned like the

thousands of other criminals executed at the hand of the Empire and doomed to be forgotten forever. But God raised him “on the third day” declaring that because of Christ we are not doomed to disappear into oblivion forever forgotten. The curse has been broken once and for all. That promise interrupts our grinding routine crashing unexpectedly into our lives from nowhere, ex nihilo, extra nos offering to once again make a new creation and open a new future for us.

Such an undeserved offer is unexpected. It is not simply good luck. It is not just some amorphous ooze that fills the universe. It is better than that. It is a gift specifically offered to us as individuals just like God specifically offered it to two specific people, Abram and Sarai. Such an intentional gift can only be called one thing: a Blessing.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Hopeful*

“So Abram went, as the Lord had told time . . . [and] departed from Haran” (v. 4b). The promise transformed and changed Abram and Sarai. The promise is offered and received by faith. Resurrected from the hopelessness and resignation of their barren fate, they leave their old life behind in Haran and begin their pilgrimage to the land of promise. Even though the child of promise was yet to be born (Isaac), it was as if that child had already been born in their hearts. When their faith trusted the promise, their despair turned to hope. No longer “settled” or stuck in their past, they could move ahead to embrace the new future God had given them through this promise.

That same promise is offered to our barren and hopeless hearts. Christ lives, no longer just another crucified criminal condemned to oblivion. He is risen and ascended to fill the universe. His fate is offered to us through Word and Sacrament. Therefore, we no longer need to fear being relegated to the dust bin of history, forever forgotten. We have hope. We have a

future, held firmly in the nail-pierced hands of Christ. They assure us that the curse has been silenced. God has so loved the world that we have a future that will never be forgotten. As sure as Christ is risen, we can be sure that our lives will always matter to the One whose opinion is the only one in this universe that matters.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Blessing*

“And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (v. 3). Trusting the promise, raised from their barren and hopeless lives, no longer stuck in Haran, Abram and Sarai begin their pilgrimage. God has blessed them to be a blessing. They will receive a child and a land. God’s promise is not in vain. No longer having to worry about their future, no longer crippled by their hopelessness Abram and Sarai will become Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of a people that will grow and spread and ultimately reverse the curse of Babel.

That is also the blessing that Christ bestows on all those who receive his benefits in faith. Freed from our self-preoccupation, from our barren selfishness, from our fear of oblivion, we “get to” pour our lives out in service of the neighbor and the world. Clinging to the promise of Christ the mission of the church is set loose upon the world. We can leave behind Haran. Self preservation and survival are no longer in our vocabulary. We can dare to innovate and take risks. “We never did it this way before” is a phrase relegated to the dust bin of history. We are free, filled with hope poised to make a new creation that “never existed this way before.”

Richly blessed by the promise of God the church has only one way it can live in this world: to be a blessing, to be in mission, to exist “for those who aren’t here yet,” to give hope to all, and to call humanity ahead to that promise land that will finally reverse and undo the splintering curse of Babel.