

Lent 3A: Genesis 12:1-9  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
The Rev. W. Terry Miller  
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### **What to Give the Man who has Everything**

Even though I am a lifelong Episcopalian, I have over my years gotten to know Martin Luther and Lutheranism pretty well. One of the peculiarities about Lutherans, I've learned, is that Lutherans read Scripture with an eye towards Law and Gospel. According to Martin Luther, throughout Scripture, you see the Word of God coming in these two modes: Law, command, judgment, and Gospel, promise, forgiveness, grace. Both Law and Gospel are important, and every sermon should include something about both. I even heard of one 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher who would stand on one foot as he preached the Law for half the sermon and then he would stand on the other as he preached the Gospel. Law and Gospel, Luther argued, are important and Scripture always includes both.

As much as I respect Luther, I don't know that I entirely agree with him. I mean, just look at our first lesson this morning from Genesis, the story of God establishing the covenant with Abram, as Abraham was originally called. God says to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I'm going to make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." There's no Law here, no Shoulds, no ethical command. It's just, I'm going to do this for you. I'm going to give you a great destiny.

This seems like a pretty good deal that God is offering—maybe not "fame and fortune," but "fame and family," a *big* family. God has great things in store for Abram, and there are no strings attached—all he has to do is accept the promise and claim it. Except that when the promise comes, it's not entirely clear that Abram is looking for any great future.

You see, Abram was the son of a wealthy tribesman, who was a son of a wealthy tribesman. He has everything one could want—flocks of sheep, slaves to shepherd them and tend to his needs. He's living a life of ease, eating peeled grapes in the shade of his tent. He's got a wife, yeah, Sarah, but she's "barren," we're told, she can't get pregnant. Which means Abram is even more encouraged to live life for today, since he doesn't have to worry about providing for any children. He's unproductive, both literally and metaphorically, and consequently morally immature. But he's enjoying life, without a care in the world, or at least none that we know of. Abram may be 75 years old, but he's the ancient equivalent of the 30 year old man-child living in his parents' basement, the poster child for "failure to launch." That's where Abram is when God calls him and says, "Have I got an adventure for you!"

This may seem like an odd approach for God to take with Abram, a strange way to draw a guy like him in. But it's really savvy. You see, Abram is "privileged" as we would say today and so we can imagine he's dealing with some of the same internal struggles that many young people, and even older people, are dealing with in regards to the issue of "privilege." You see, we talk a lot about privilege today—white privilege, male privilege, able-bodied privilege—but we are

missing the fact that all of us here, everyone in our country, is immensely privileged just by the fact that we live in the West in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. By that fact alone, we are in the top 1% by global and historical standards. That is, we live better today than people do anywhere else at any point in human history. That's a privilege none of us have earned, we didn't even choose it. We were born into it, just as Abram was born into his family's wealth. I mean, think about all the great things we have that we just take for granted—there are highways and automobiles, an electrical grid, water and sewage systems, advanced medicine, schools, a stable financial system, a rule of law, free speech, freedom of religion. Not everyone in the world today has those, let alone all of them. But we take them for granted. They were there before we got here. They are unearned privilege.

Now, if you have any moral sense at all, the question quickly emerges, What should you do about that? About the fact that there are people out there who weren't arbitrarily rewarded to the same degree you were. One answer is to feel guilty and flagellate yourself, beat yourself up like the monks in Monty Python. Taking that approach, beating yourself up about it, may make you feel better, lessen your feelings of guilt, even earn you some social credit. But at the end of the day, it doesn't change anything, not for you or anyone else. The other solution is to do something with those gifts, the talents you've been provided with. It's to accept responsibility and work hard to use those gifts to benefit not just yourself, but others, and to extend those privileges to the degree possible to others. That's in a sense what God is offering, what he's calling Abram to, when God tells him that he will be "*blessed to be a blessing.*" All the gifts he's been given, they've been given for a reason, to be shared. You know, the Germans have an expression for this: "every gift (Gabe) is an assignment (Aufgabe)." To be given a gift is to be given responsibility for the gift received—to honor the giver of the gift by acknowledging, receiving, and sharing that gift.

I can tell you how powerful that idea is—being given a gift to give to others. For that was how I came to accept my own calling as a priest. I was in Ireland, studying abroad my junior year, and I had already received something of a call before, which I humbly declined. "Thanks, God, but I have *my own* plans." But I was in chapel one Sunday, trying to make sense of my next steps after college, not thinking about ministry at all, when I had a vision, a vision of me taking a book off a bookshelf and handing it to a young man. As visions go, it was far from fantastical. No Charlton Heston voice of God. But it was enough to point me in the right direction, to get me to see that all that I've been given, all the privileges, all the knowledge and experiences, my passions and faith, the very fact that I got to travel and study in another country—that wasn't just for me to enjoy, but had been given to be shared with others. That's when I knew, when I accepted God's call to ordained ministry.

I had already been given lots of truly amazing gifts, but now I had a purpose. That was the same for Abram—God now offered him a purpose. Something he could never have sitting in the tent shade. And so he kissed his sedentary, safe life goodbye and headed off for an adventure.

Now, like most adventures, Abram's journey will not be easy. He is going to face a famine, which forces Abram and his family to become refugees in Egypt, where he will play his wife Sarah off as his sister, so that Pharaoh wouldn't kill him to get to her. Abram and family will escape Egypt, but then he'll get into a row with his nephew Lot and the family will be split. Lot

will be captured in a local war, and Abram will have to fight a battle to free him. And all this time, Sarah will still be childless. Goes to show you that accepting God's call, accepting a blessing, doesn't mean that you get a charmed life from then on. No, accepting the call is just the beginning, the beginning of an adventure with God. It's akin to what I say to couples in premarital counseling: in getting married, you're not choosing your future, you're choosing who you will face the future with. Just so, in accepting God's call, Abram is not choosing his future, he's choosing to face that future with God.

Even so, that doesn't mean Abram never questions God, never questions where God's leading him. A few chapters later, after all these setbacks I mentioned, Abram comes to God with doubt and questions, wondering if God is ever going to make good on his promise. God reassures him, tells him to look at the stars in the night sky. "As many stars are in the heavens, so shall your descendants be," he says. Staring up at the stars, Abram accepts God's promise, believes it, believes God, and, we are told, God "reckoned it as righteousness." Abram trusted God and God judged things between Abram and himself to be right, as they should be.

It's clear from the following chapters, though, that Abram's "belief," his faith, is far from a perfect. For, not much time later, in just the next chapter, Abram takes his inheritance into his own hands, by getting his wife's slave Hagar pregnant. So much for believing in God's plan! And then, a little later, we find Abram arguing with God, second-guessing his decision to lay waste to Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness, haggling with God over their lives, pushing back on God's plans. If Abram is the "model of faith," as Paul and others make him out to be, it's clear that faith is not the same as blind obedience. It's not to be confused with thoughtlessly following orders, acting like automatons, robots. It's more like clinging to God, wrestling with him, trusting him enough to insist that God make good on his promises, saying "I will not let you go until you bless me."

The resolve to cling to God, to hang on even when the going gets hard, will be even more important when Abram learns about the destiny of his descendants. Right after the starry sky scene, Abram falls into a deep sleep, a trance, and God shows him that it's not going to be easy for his descendants. They'll be enslaved in a foreign land for 400 years. They'll be put upon, exploited and abused. They'll eventually escape, with Pharaoh's gold, and then they will *finally* take possession of the land now before Abram, the Promised Land. God *will* make good on his promise of making Abram's family into a great nation, but it won't be an easy or straight path for them. Just as it won't be for Abram. They will face hardships, setbacks, and challenges, just as Abram will. But the promise will remain. And as Abram's descendants, the Israelites, come to embrace that promise, they will be formed, made into a people who will truly be able to possess the land, to possess it in peace and harmony. They will be able to do that precisely because they have been through these challenges and have learned to trust God, practicing faith as Abram has, following God and sometimes arguing with him but all the while trusting that God will give a blessing. This is critical, because throughout these trials, it will not be clear where the blessing is, let alone how it'll work to bless others. But faith will serve for them as a lead-line, a cable holding them up and leading them through the hardships to the realization of the promise. Faith will carry them through.

As the story of Abram and his descendants show, God promises posterity, prosperity, and property, but not painlessness. But really, how could God promise that to them, or to us? Life is full of challenges, struggles, hardships and losses, then as now. None of us are immune to them, no matter how faithful we are. But, as Abram's story shows, the struggles are necessary for growth, necessary in order to become the people we were meant to be, the people God wants us to be— faithful, generous, adventurous, and persevering people, a people who walk with God, like Abram did. Without those struggles, we would remain selfish and self-serving, as useless as Abram was sitting in the tent eating peeled grapes. But through the hardships and struggles, God transforms us, makes us holy, blessed to be a blessing.

The covenant God makes with Abram here is a covenant of grace, it's a gift with no strings attached. But in accepting the gift, Abram accepts the assignment, the *gabe* with the *Aufgabe*. The same is true for us, Abram's spiritual descendants, God has given us gifts, and has given us an assignment. called us to an adventure, to accept that we are blessed to be a blessing, and to live a life walking with God.. And it's never too late to start. Thanks be to God.