

Israel: God Calls People

Pastor Lisa Kipp

Genesis 12:1-7 NRSV

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. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Exodus 3:1-12 NRSV

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹²He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."



I'm going to start with a little movie trivia this morning. Raise your hand when you can tell me what movie these images come from...

[See images on screen.]

These screenshots come from the opening scene of the movie. As the music starts to build to a crescendo the camera takes the viewer all around the beautiful little villages nestled in the Austrian Alps. We see the magnitude of the majestic mountains, and then little by little the camera starts to focus in on Julie Andrews in all her glory as she spins in circles and begins to sing about the hills coming alive. The movie begins with a wide-angle perspective, and then narrows in on the center character of the story.

We're reaching a similar part in God's story today. The first 11 chapters of Genesis have given us a wide-angle view of God's incredible work in creation, followed by humanity's universal role in missing the mark. Now suddenly in Genesis 12 the story begins to focus in on God's relationship with one particular man. Professor Mark Throntveit puts it this way: It's as if "God decided that if punishing *all the earth* was an ineffective means of dealing with sin, perhaps establishing a relationship with *one individual* would work." So God chooses to call Abram and establish a covenant with him.

At first glance it is understandable why you might feel uneasy about this shift in the story. Why does God choose just one man to receive such a blessing? What has Abram done to deserve it anyway? You don't need to read all that deep into Abram's story to realize that there actually isn't anything special that he has done to deserve God's call. In fact, Abram makes just as many mistakes in life as you and me. Rather this story reminds us that God chooses Abram, and subsequently the people of Israel, because of God's divine love and grace, not because of Abram or Israel's worthiness.

Yet God has chosen a particular people to receive a particular blessing. Perhaps that is the more troubling part of God's activity. But here's where it is important to read the Biblical text closely. God says to Abram, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I 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." The blessing Abram receives from God is not for Abram's sake, nor for the sake of his family. The blessing God gives to Abram is for the sake of the whole world.

Is this how we often think of what it means to be blessed by God? We might say, we've been blessed with a great family, or a great job, or good weather. Most often, we tend to think of blessings as a certain way that God has blessed us individually. Or maybe even as a reward for something we have done right. But that certainly isn't how blessings work in the Bible. David Lose points out that "in the Bible, anytime God blesses you, it's so that you can be a blessing to someone else."





Consider the amount of times we hear politicians say, “God bless America.” If we’re understanding blessings the way that God gives blessings in the Bible, we’d understand that if God is indeed blessing America, it is so that God can work through America to be a blessing to the world.

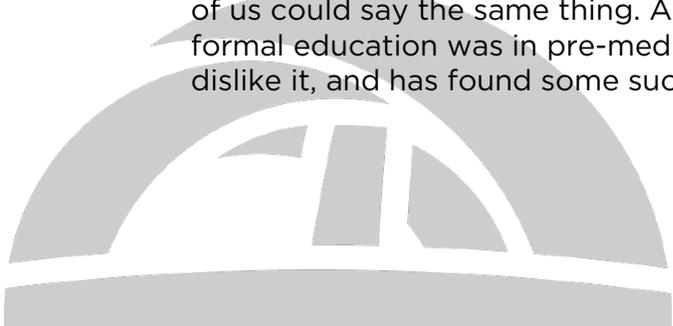
This week I witnessed a beautiful example of a group of people blessed to be a blessing. I suspect you heard about the mother and daughter from Blooming Prairie who were killed in a car accident that occurred on September 7. Rachel Harberts was a first grade teacher. Her daughter Emerson was just 8-years-old. The funeral for Rachel and Emerson was held this Thursday at Gloria Dei in Rochester. Directly across the street from Gloria Dei sits St. Pius Catholic Elementary School. A classroom of students and their teacher took it upon themselves to share their love and blessing with the Emerson family and all who attended the funeral on Thursday.

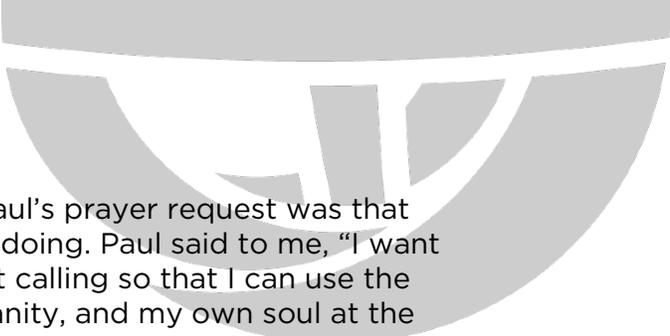
“Our thoughts and prayers are with you, Harberts family.” These signs were in the grass directly facing Gloria Dei’s parking lot. Now take a look closely at the windows of the elementary school. “God bless Emerson” and “God bless Rachel” filled each of the panes of glass. These young children know God’s love. I suspect they learn about it each day in their religion classes. Knowing this love, they sought to bless a family and community deeply grieving an unexplainable loss. As I walked through the halls of Gloria Dei toward a meeting Thursday evening, one of their members said to me, “We don’t even know how to respond to these deaths, but what those kids did was a gift to all of us today.” In a special way, these young people and their teachers were blessed to be a blessing.

So how does Abram do with God’s blessing? How does he respond to God’s call? Remember God promised to give him many descendants, land, and make his name great. But as we follow Abram’s story, it is certainly a promise filled with tension. God promised Abram and his wife Sarah a son. And while they do receive a son, it is after many, many long years of waiting. They do reach the promised land, but the only piece of it that Abram actually possesses is the burial plot he buys for his wife, and then the place where he himself is later buried.

Yet all along Abram believes in God’s promises. He stakes his life on them. He gives up nearly everything he once knew for the life God was calling him to. But I suspect Abram had some doubts from time to time. He must have wondered where God was leading him. Truth be told, I suspect that all of us have had those questions.

This past Wednesday evening we invited worshippers to come forward for prayers after receiving communion. Zumbro member Paul Landry came forward. He gave me his permission to share this story. Paul’s long struggled with what exactly God is calling him to do in his career. He said to me, “God’s never talked to me clearly and said, ‘this is what you should be doing in your life.’” I told Paul that I think most of us could say the same thing. At one time in his life, Paul longed to be a pilot. His formal education was in pre-medicine. Today, Paul is in hotel sales. He doesn’t dislike it, and has found some success in this career, but in many ways, Paul feels





like he's never found the exact right vocational fit. Paul's prayer request was that God might make it clearer to him what he should be doing. Paul said to me, "I want God to put me in the right circumstance to be in that calling so that I can use the gifts and skills God has given me to serve God, humanity, and my own soul at the same time." It sounds to me like Paul is wondering how he can use the blessings he's been given by God to be a blessing to the world.

Theologian Jacqueline Lapsley makes an important point about Abram's blessing. It is Abram's trust, not his actions that are stressed. "Blessing did not come from what Abram *did*, he became a blessing to others because he was open to the on-going relationship God offered him. In accepting that blessing, he could become a blessing to others."

I think Paul is on to something simply by his prayer request alone. He doesn't know exactly what he's looking for. He can't make clarity out of what God is calling him to do. But he trusts that God can.

Further on in God's story with the Israelites (and hundreds of years later), God calls Moses. Much like everyone else that God calls in the Bible, Moses isn't too sure that he has what it takes to do what God is asking him to do. Yet God speaks a word of promise again to the people of Israel, reminding them of the journey he has been on with them. Remember, God says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob ... I will be with you." It's as if God is saying, "I haven't left you yet; what makes you think I'm going to leave you on your own now?"

That's the promise that we cling to as God's chosen people. It isn't up to us alone. We are called and we are blessed. When we sense that life is barren, as Abram and Sarah once did, God promises new life. When we think we aren't worthy of the call, or can't even make sense of what it is God is calling us to do, God's love and mercy and forgiveness remains constant. May God continue to bless you ... and through that blessing may you go forth to love and bless the world. Amen.

