

## LAND, DESCENDANTS, AND BLESSING Genesis 12:1-4

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on June 7, 2020, Trinity Sunday, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.*

---

*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. 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.”*

*So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.*

---

In this year’s summer sermon series, entitled “Beginnings,” we are working our way through the first book of the Bible. Last week we left off at the Tower of Babel, with the newly minted yet recently fallen human race dispersed across the earth and unable to communicate with one another.

This week, we turn to what immediately follows, the story of Abraham and Sarah. As Israeli scholar Moshe Weinfeld writes:

...after a string of *curses* that begins with Adam and Eve, human history reaches a *turning point* with Abraham as *blessings* instead of *curses* are *emphatically promised*.<sup>1</sup>

We meet Abraham and Sarah initially as names in a genealogy:

- “When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of *Abram*...”<sup>2</sup>
- Then: “...the name of Abram’s wife was *Sarai*...”; and “...*Sarai* was barren; she had no child.”<sup>3</sup>

One verse later, as Chapter 12 opens, we read:

*12And the Lord said to Abram,*

*‘Go from your country and your [birthplace] and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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.’*

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 11:26.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 11:29-30.

This blessing is as rich as they come:

- Land
- Nationhood
- Descendants
- Blessing for self
- Blessing for “all the nations of the world.”

The study Bible we use in most of my classes defines “blessing” as “*well-being* in *all* of life’s dimensions – *material, social, spiritual.*” This blessing includes promises that the descendants of Abraham and Sarah will become “a populous nation whose *wealth* and *well being* will benefit their *neighbors.*”<sup>4</sup> Through Abraham and Sarah, “*all* the nations of the world will be blessed.”

After Fall, Flood, and Babel, blessing pays a welcome visit.

## I.

Let’s notice some aspects of the couple who receive this blessing:

- Sarah is sixty-five years old.
- All her life she has been barren.
- Abraham is 75.

No children. No heir. No descendants. And suddenly they are going to become a “great nation,” with land, offspring, and blessing. Because of their childlessness, their barrenness, their age, the possibility of the promise is always in question, the feasibility of fulfillment never not in doubt. No wonder Sarah later laughs at the promise of pregnancy.<sup>5</sup>

But the blessing comes nonetheless, and to receive it Abraham and Sarah must respond. The actions God requires of such response are not insignificant.

*Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father’s house.*

This command moves from the macro to the micro, from the national to the personal:

Go forth....

- From your *land* (which is macro)
- From your *birthplace* (which is specific to your own past)
- From the *family home* in which you are *now* living
  - The home into which Abraham and Sarah likely moved on their wedding night
  - The home in which they have been living for years
  - The home in which they have tried to conceive, season after season after season.

---

<sup>4</sup> “Excursus: Promises to the Patriarchs,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 18:12.

At 65 and 75, “go forth” – sever your ties with security, familiarity, ancestry, *to the land I will show you [when you arrive in it]*.

William Butler Yeats wrote:

That is no country for old men....

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing....<sup>6</sup>

\*\*

Abraham and Sarah indeed “go forth.” They scout out three major urban centers:

- Shechem in the north<sup>7</sup>
- Bethel in the central region<sup>8</sup>
- and Hebron in the south.<sup>9</sup>

They settle in Hebron. It takes another twenty-five years before Isaac is born as their heir.<sup>10</sup> “Soul clap its hands and sings.”

## II.

Over the past fourteen days, our nation has witnessed the death and funeral of a man named George Floyd, who stepped from his vehicle in Minneapolis no less obscure than Abraham and Sarah stepped from a genealogy in Genesis. During these days, I have received thoughtful communications from several of you. I have read everything you have sent. I have talked with our clergy. I have done what I always do when there is a national crisis: I have reverted to the books. I read and read and read. I read and mull, read and think, read and worry, read and pray. And I feel no closer than I felt two weeks ago concerning how I should respond personally or how I think we should respond as a church.

- Like you, I have seen the video of the death of George Floyd under the knee a Minneapolis police officer and it seems clear to me that it is a homicide.
- I have seen videos of peaceful protests.
- I have seen videos of violent actions.
- I have seen police kneeling in solidarity with protestors and police knock an elderly protestor to the ground.
- I have seen stories of police officers who have been killed in this particular line of duty.

---

<sup>6</sup> W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” quoted in Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 72. The poem was written in 1926.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 12:6.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 12:8.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 13:18.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 21.

- I have seen the President holding a Bible in front of Saint John's Church, and I have read General Mattis' critique both of that act and the role of the military in creating space for it to happen and in standing with the President.

\*\*

Yesterday morning I sat down to read, for the first time the classic essay by Vaclav Havel entitled "The Power of the Powerless." Havel wrote it in 1978, when he was still a dissident, before he became President of Czechoslovakia during the Velvet Revolution after the collapse of communism in 1989.<sup>11</sup>

Those of you who know the essay will recall that it features a fictional "greengrocer" around whom Havel describes the role that *ideology* can play in our lives:

The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: "Workers of the world, unite!" Why does he do it? What is he trying to communicate to the world? Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals? Has he really given more than a moment's thought to how such a unification might occur and what it would mean?

Havel continues:

I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their *real* opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because *it has been done that way for years*, because *everyone does it*, and because that is the way it *has to be*. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble.

Then Havel says:

Let us now imagine that one day something in our greengrocer snaps and he stops putting up the slogans merely to ingratiate himself. He stops voting in elections he knows are a farce. He begins to say what he *really* thinks at political meetings. And he even finds the strength in himself to express solidarity with those whom his conscience commands him to support. In this revolt the greengrocer steps out of living *within the lie*. He rejects the ritual and breaks the rules of the game. He discovers once more his suppressed identity and dignity. He gives his freedom a concrete significance. His revolt is an attempt to live *within the truth*...

Havel continues:

It seems that the primary breeding ground for what might, in the widest possible sense of the word, be understood as an opposition in the post-totalitarian system is *living within the truth*. The confrontation...takes place...on...the level of *human consciousness* and *conscience*, the *existential* level...

---

<sup>11</sup>Vaclav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," originally published in 1978.

The Prague Spring [he continues] is usually understood as a clash between *two groups* on the level of *real power*: those who wanted to maintain the system as it was and those who wanted to reform it. It is frequently forgotten, however, that this encounter was merely *the final act* and the *inevitable consequence* of a long drama originally played out chiefly in the *theatre of the spirit* and the *conscience of society*. And that somewhere at the beginning of this drama, there were individuals who were willing *to live within the truth*, even when things were at their worst. These people had no access to real power, nor did they aspire to it. The sphere in which they were living the truth was not necessarily even that of political thought. They could equally have been poets, painters, musicians, or simply *ordinary citizens who were able to maintain their human dignity*.

### III.

When Abraham and Sarah leave their trifecta of “land, birthplace, and family home,” they leave much of their own *known* world in their going forth in faith. This ancient couple leave behind:

- Much they *know* to be true
- Much they *cherish* as safe
- Perhaps even what God had called them previously to do or be.

It is possible that they have for some time been living *within the lie*, but once they leave, they leave to start living *within the truth*. Their movement is spiritual and existential, in addition to being geographical. We might even call it *conversion*.

\*\*

I am not well enough versed in matters of race or law enforcement to know what elements of our current situation represent living *within the lie* and what elements live *within the truth*. But this I know from scripture: if the categories are framed as living *within the lie* or living *within the truth*, scripture always calls us to the latter. Faith leads us to live *within the truth*. It, and it alone, *sets us free*.<sup>12</sup>

Living *within the truth* is a “country for old men,” and old women, for young women and young men, for children, for youth. It is a country for cities and states, for metropolitan areas and rural villages. *Living within the truth* is accepting the call of God to leave land, birthplace, and home to travel to a land that God will show us when we arrive. Living within the truth is what faith is all about. *Living within the truth* is what conversion means, and it is *truth* to which we are converted. “Soul clap its hands and sings.”

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA

---

<sup>12</sup> John 8:32.