

Go Where I Send You

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Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

The God we worship in Christ Jesus is a God who calls us. And God always calls us to serve with a purpose. God called creation into being out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and set the stars in their courses by speaking "Let there be light and there was light..."

Last week we read in Genesis 2 God's call to Adam and Eve in the Garden to live in obedience and trust with God. They, too, were created with a purpose- to serve and protect the earth and all who live in it. This is our call, too.

Today, we read the call to Abram in Genesis 12. Just a few verses before this we learn that Abram and his wife, Sarai, are barren with no hope for children. Yet, God still has a plan and purpose for them. Listen to the Word of the Lord.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-4, The Call of Abram

12 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. ² 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. ³ 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."

⁴ 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.

Proclamation of the Word

Have you ever found yourself in the same boat as Abram and Sarai?

You are comfortably secure where you are in life, and then you are uprooted and asked to go, leave all that behind, to move into an unknown future?

Maybe your parent or spouse takes a job in a new town. You have to leave behind friends, neighbors, your church family, a school or work that you love.

Maybe you feel God leading you in a new vocation, a calling and work. You leave home to go to grad school or seminary, or serve a year as a Young Adult Mission Volunteer through the church. (Right now Fort Hill has 2 mission volunteers: Jake Crowther in Austin, TX and Emi Lungmus in Korea.)

Or maybe, you have not gone anywhere, but the world around you and the ground beneath you seems to have shifted. You do not recognize the trusted institutions- our government, the news media, our town, our church, things have changed and are changing. It is disorienting, unsettling.

As we have discussed with Mark Tidsworth this weekend, to be faithful followers of Jesus and the church of Jesus Christ, we are being called into some new ways of being church because of all the changes going on in our world. We have the same mission, but we are living in a new context.

These kinds of changes can feel like bad news at first.

Abram and Sarai have had some bad news. They are barren, unable to conceive a child. Remember, children provided a sense of security and well-being for our ancestors. Children were a sense of Social Security, the ones who would take care of their parents and help provide for the family.

Abram and Sarai had history, but their future was hanging in the balance without hope of children. And there is nothing more discouraging than feeling like you have no future.

Barrenness, both literally and figuratively, can feel hopeless. As Doug Bratt, reflects, "It's the kind of dead end you and I may run into at home, on the job or at the doctor's office. Barrenness is dead relationships and underwater mortgages. Barrenness is what poverty, joblessness and a poor education produce. Barrenness is the stubborn resistance to peace of Palestine, sub-Saharan Africa and some of our city streets."ⁱ

Sarai and Abram's infertility feels like a dead end, but that is exactly where God likes to work! God always brings life out of death, hope out of barrenness, and light out of darkness. It is through a cross that God resurrects Jesus. Dead ends are God's wheel house because God wants us to know that when we are powerless over a situation, it is God's power at work. God will make a way out of no way.

It is in this place of barrenness that God calls Abram and Sarai. God sends them off with a purpose and a mission. Leaving all they know and love, they are called into a future. They will have to trust God on that journey. And the result- BLESSING. Blessing all around.

Can you imagine how hokey that might have sounded to them? God says, "You two elderly people will be the vessels through whom I bless the entire world, all nations, and kinds of people." Abram which means "father of many" will be the ancestor of all Jews, Muslims, and Christians. All of us children of Abraham are called to bless and serve God's purposes in the world. You know the verse, for God so loved the world that God gives his only begotten Son, not to condemn the world, but to save it. (John 3:16)

What do you think about blessing?

As we discussed the passage on Tuesday, Dana mentioned the kind of blessing that we see on Social Media- #blessed. "I got a new car #blessed" or "I found \$100 bill #blessed," but blessed is knowing God who creates, redeems us, and calls us to follow in trust and faith. Knowing God's presence and purpose and serving others for the sake of the kingdom. That is #blessed.

But it can begin with noticing the gifts that are right in front of us. I know a woman whose practice it is to notice what God is doing and name it, saying the word "Blessing" to herself when she sees or experiences something that is a gift of God's grace. For instance, I just had this happen the other night. Hallie became ill on Wednesday with what we thought was a horrible stomach virus and all that entails. Thursday afternoon we went to the doctor's office. After blood work, we were racing to the St. Francis hospital for an emergency appendectomy. The whole way I am praying that the appendix has not erupted. At the same time, Hallie and I laughed at the bizarre reality that we were on the way to surgery, but thankful for the Doctor and nurses who were helping us. After Hallie was wheeled off to surgery, I settled into my chair and pulled out this little book, *An Altar in the World* by Barbara Brown Taylor. I have no idea why I picked it up from the end table. I have not read it in two years. There was a bookmark to this exact page. I opened it while sitting in the waiting room while my daughter had emergency surgery. I read,

Waiting is certainly a kind of prayer...once, between then time my doctor gave me some bad news about my health and the time I was scheduled for surgery to have a bad thing cut out, I found it possible to live my life in ways that had never occurred to me before. (Seriously, I am sitting in a waiting room waiting for Hallie to have a bad thing cut out!) I never thought I could value being able to walk around my house and look out all windows. I never thought about the brickwork on the building where I worked as beautiful before, or the sound of people laughing on the sidewalk as welcome signs of life...Even if my news stayed bad instead of getting better, I like to think that these simple pleasures would not have lost their power to console me. They constituted an answer to my prayer for more life, even if that life turned out to be shorter than the one I thought I wanted.ⁱⁱ

Reading those words was a blessing like you could not imagine- a gift of God's grace. Just noticing blessings is a gift.

But allowing God to use us in God's purposes to bless is a means of grace, too. For Abram and Sarai were called so that God could bless all nations and peoples through them. That is still the purpose of God's church- the Church of Jesus Christ. As Dan Clendenin reflects on this passage:

"Our ultimate journey is to move from a self-regarding heart curved in on itself to an other-regarding openness to the love of God, a love for others, and a love for all His world. That, of course, is a journey that lasts a lifetime."ⁱⁱⁱ

While #blessed is sometimes used to describe personal gains or material gifts like a new car, God's blessing is always centered in love of God and love for others. As we have been discussing about the Shifts with Mark's help, missional people are called to be a part of what God is doing to bring about the kingdom of God.

I know one church who has been on this journey of God's blessing. Allison Creek Presbyterian is a small country church in my home county of York, SC. Al Master was the pastor there when I first met him.

Now my friend, Sam McGregor, is pastor. Sam is a former PSA student, a Clemson Dairy Science major, now pastoring a once rural church that is turning into a suburban church as the community shifts around them.

Allison Creek church has an old slave cemetery in the woods that had become overgrown and unkempt. It can't get any more barren and dead than 200 year old cemetery. But this cemetery has brought new life and mission, relationships, and hope to this church. In light of all the race tensions, the members began to clean it up, ask questions, wanting to know the story. Because they have the land, they created a walking trail and soccer fields for the all the new neighbors moving into the area. The cemetery was on the trail. They decided to tell the story, even hosting school groups. They met some of the slave descendents and began getting to know each other and understanding their experiences, including the ways they experience racism today.

Sam and the disciples of Allison Creek also learned that some of the slaves went back to Liberia in Africa when freedom came after the civil war only to find more civil war.

So what to do now? Sam and the church built a relationship with a local church there in Monrovia, Liberia where Allison Creek descendents of their church now lived. They just returned from a pilgrimage there. They learned what God was doing and what the needs were. The mayor explained that many of their children drown while canoeing to school. So through Facebook Sam found for life jackets and a CJ Spiller t-shirt for the mayor who is a Clemson fan! There is a new "Allison Creek Empowerment Center" with a computer lab to help with education and jobs, a ministry of the local church. And my favorite, they were able to show a photograph to a man of his great-grandparents who had been slaves in York. The man had never seen the pictures and was overjoyed. They told him stories of his grandparents' perseverance and success from journals collected. And of course, they worshiped and ate together a lot building a friendship grounded in the good news of Jesus Christ remembering that God makes a way out of no way.

It was journey they never imagined they would take until they started listening for the Spirit of God and looking in their own back yard, literally. And God is leading them in new ways of mission- bringing new life, hope, relationship, and healing some of the divide between the descendents of slaves and the slave-holder church. Like Abram and Sarai the disciples of Allison Creek Presbyterian Church were sent out into the world to be a blessing and they, in turn, will tell you that they have been blessed a hundred fold.

Some of us are called to leave home and serve God's mission, but God's particular calling is sometimes right there in the backyard. We need hearts to see it and ears to hear. Fort Hill church was founded to minister to our college students, but we also, have been named for the plantation served by African American slaves. Our University is learning about that and public plaques are beginning to tell the

whole story. What is God calling us to do today to support, encourage, and bless our African American students on campus and our neighbors in this community where racism still is alive and well?

Or in our front yard about 600 students will move in next fall, right across the street. Maybe we are planted on this corner for such a time as this. How can we bless and minister to students who are literally across the street? These are just a couple of the ways we might consider what God is calling us to do as Fort Hill Church. I hope you will join the leaders of the church to listen to the Spirit and pray for what God is calling our church to do and be with these new opportunities.

Come back this afternoon to hear Mark and consider how God is calling you personally in your daily walk because...

God is in the business of sending his people out, even out of our comfort zones, to be a part of what God hopes for and desires for the world. What a blessing that calling is and one we never have to do alone. Thanks be to God!

Benediction

*You go nowhere by accident.
Wherever you go, God is sending you there.
Wherever you are, God has put you there.
He has a purpose in your being there.*

*Christ, who indwells in you, has something He wants to do through you,
wherever you are.*

Believe this, and go in His grace, and love, and power. Amen!

ⁱ Doug Bratt, *Looking into the Lectionary on Genesis 12:1-4*, Center for Excellence in Preaching, Calvin Seminary
http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-2a/?type=old_testament_lectionary#sthash.C02fiTZh.dpuf

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel B. Clendenin "Leave Your Country," *The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself*, Journey with Jesus Foundation