

Roots
Son of Laughter

One of the things that I've discovered, after being a father for 5 years now, is that people love to tell you whether they think your children look more like you or your spouse. It's really kind of interesting because, quite frankly, people are really not very good at it. Someone will come up to me and say, "Shaughnessy looks just like you," and then literally two minutes later someone else will come up and say, "I can't believe how much Shaughnessy looks like her mother." Again and again I've experienced this and not just with Shauny, but with Adelie and Wynn timer. I'm actually sort of surprised that people haven't told me yet that the baby in Megan's stomach is a spitting image of me!

Now the truth, of course, is that I kind of like it when people say that my children look like me. Admittedly it's a little weird because I'm a guy and there are girls, but you at least want some of who you are to wear off on your children. And I was thinking about that this week because of the story of Abram, or Abraham, that we are looking at. When I was a kid I learned from a young age the song, "Father Abraham". How many of you are familiar with that song? And the reason why we call him "Father Abraham" is because in Romans, Paul says that all those who believe and follow God are children of Abraham. Which means that we are all children of Abraham, so to speak. And so, perhaps a good question for us to ask this morning as we hear about Abram is to ask whether or not we resemble him in this story. Do we, do you, look like Father Abraham?

And one of the first things that is striking about Abram is just how quickly he seems to follow God. And let us not sugar-coat it, this would not have been easy. I love the way that God is so direct when he talks to Abram. There's no passing of niceties, no "So, how you doin'?" or "Wow, you've got great looking sheep" or "Don't you love this autumnal weather?" No, he begins by saying, "Go" or "Leave"? Leave what? Your country, your family, and your father's household; all things, of course, that were very important in that day and age. In other words, Abram, leave everything that is comfortable, secure and safe. And, of course, he doesn't even tell him to where he's going, he just says, "Go."

If you were here last week you will see the clear connection between this story and the story of the tower of Babel. There they decided to settle, to be safe, to be comfortable and not to scatter. But in marked contrast, in this story, despite the fact that Abram is 75 years old we see that he simply goes. He leaves what is comfortable, what is safe and secure and even though he may not know exactly where he's going, even though God has made it clear that he will have to leave what he holds dear, Abram goes because God has called him to. Again, as we talked about last week, we have this clear statement that if you are following God, then God will

oftentimes force you out of your comfort zone. (And while I won't ask you to raise your hands, I do hope that you all practiced your homework from last week to be intentionally scattered in your neighborhoods or work or even here.)

But, of course, the point to this story is about more than just leaving and being uncomfortable. It is about the fact that in the leaving, in the going, that God is going to bless Abram. That as Abram is willing to follow God, despite the risks and fears, that God is going to work in and through Abram in ways that would never happen had Abram decided to simply stay at home. And not only that he is going to be blessed, but that he is going to bless others. That, of course is where we get the fairly familiar phrase, "Blessed to be a blessing."

Now that's something that perhaps rolls easily off of our tongues (Blessed to be a blessing), but it's important for us to remember this in context, to remember where we have been over the last few weeks. A seminary professor of mine said that this story of Abram is a testimony to the fact that God has refused to let go of his creation. Remember, God created the world out of love for us, but we wrestled with really believing that and accepting that love, which means we run from God and from what God desires for us. And so, God punished the world through the flood and while we may have corrected ourselves a bit, it wasn't long before, as we already mentioned, we were holing up in towers and avoiding God's call. And so, "Blessed to be a blessing" is more than just a stewardship slogan (though it's a good one!) and more than just reminding us that "to whom much is given, much is required." Rather, it is this bold claim that God uses people like Abram, like us (Abraham's children), to work through in order to help bring about his plan for this world. We cannot, of course, do it without God, but how amazing to think that God has chosen to use us, to help bless and bring peace to this world that is so desperately in need of it. And I think it's hugely important that we see that "blessed to be a blessing" is not just a nice thing to do, but it is the role we play in helping to bring justice, peace and reconciliation to the world.

There are, of course, many ways that we participate in God's plan to try and bring wholeness, shalom, salvation to this world. We send missionaries throughout the world to help people learn about the God who created them and who longs to be in relationship with them. We talked last week about the fact that we're giving money to an Iraqi Presbyterian Church in order to help them take care of the refugees that have settled in their church. We show people the love of God by taking care of their children through Noah's ark, our preschool and daycare. We also do this through a ministry we support, and which many of you are probably familiar with, called Wheeler Mission. I've asked Eric Gardner, who is the director of Wheeler Mission, if he might tell us a bit more about the ways in which they try to be a blessing for those in our community. Eric.

Now, it's fantastic that we help support Wheeler Mission but one of the things that's easy to have happen is that we support them, but then we don't really think about what they're doing or how they are blessing folks each day because, quite honestly, we just don't see it. In other words, if God had said to Abram, "Abram, give \$1,000 to Johny over there so that he can leave his country, his kindred and his family's household," that would have been great, but it wouldn't have nearly as much of an impact on Abram. And so, we at ZPC are continually looking for ministries that not only we can support financially, but ones that get us involved more. Maybe another way to put it is that we need to be continually looking for ways to bless people that might make us a bit more uncomfortable, that are more risky. The Mission Commission has been thinking about this and a little while back approached the session with an opportunity that they saw to do this. We would like to share that with you today and so I'm going to ask Dave to come forward now and to share with us a way that we might see ZPC being blessed to be a blessing. Dave.

Now, this is a great opportunity that we are really excited about. That said, I think it's also important that we be honest in saying that this is a bit risky, perhaps even scary for some of our folks. And if it feels like that to you, I want you to know that you are not alone. In fact, it's the reason why I wanted to include verses 10-20 in our reading today. Typically when one is preaching on this passage about Abram's call they will stop at verse 9 which is a perfectly quaint place to end. Abram's boldly following God's call to not simply be comfortable, he's set up an altar to worship God and he keeps journeying with God. It's perfect.

But then, of course, famine hits, which of course is a great reminder to us that just because we follow God doesn't mean that everything is going to be perfect. Not only that, but then Abram has to go to Egypt not exactly the place he would have wanted to go. And at this point, as the risk becomes a bit more real and the joy of "blessed to be a blessing" becomes a bit less, well, joyful, we see Abram all of a sudden forgetting the promise of God and starting to take matters into his own hands. So, in a fairly strange story for our modern sensibilities, he tells Sarai to act like she's his sister so that no harm will come his way. All of a sudden, in this moment of anxiety, when everything is more real, when having faith is much scarier, we see Abram reeling and taking matters into his own hands.

And I think that's important for us to keep in mind. Sometimes, to be blunt, "blessed to be a blessing" sounds a lot better than it actually feels in the midst of it, because it oftentimes carries risk and fear. And, of course, we have to be wise. As I said last week, while we don't want safety to be our organizing principle, we also can't be naïve. That's why we've made sure that none of the guys who will be staying at Jeremiah House are violent or sexual offenders. It's why we've talked with our preschool and day care director, Sherry Pipkin, to make sure she's on board. It's why we will have random drug tests and do our own background checks. But, of

course, there is no question that having Jeremiah House is more risky than not having it at all. And I think it's important for us to name that and to admit that it would be easier and safer for us not to do this. Again, I think it's important that scripture gives voice to just how difficult it is at times to really be a blessing. And yet, it's something that we in the leadership feel the Spirit is calling us to and quite frankly, we hope you do as well.

There is, one more interesting thing about this story that I think it's important to look at. At the Tower of Babel we discussed the fact that a part of the problem is that they were trying to build the tower in order to make a name for themselves. And then this week God tells Abram that he is going to make his name great. The difference, of course, is that God is going to make Abram's name great. This is not something that Abram is trying to do on his own.

But it's been pointed out that what's important to see is that making Abram's name great means that Abram's children and grandchildren and great grandchildren all the way down to us will remember Abram for what he has done, for his faithfulness. And it is a good opportunity, I think, for us to remember and think about what it is that we as individuals and we at ZPC will be remembered for in future generations. Will we be remembered for the large buildings we have or our budget? Probably not. There aren't a lot of churches that are known in perpetuity for their beautiful buildings. But I do think we could be known for the lives we've touched, for perhaps a son or granddaughter or great granddaughter who will say, "My father was an alcoholic or a drug addict" and this church somewhere in Indiana reached out and supported him and loved him and showed him the grace of Christ and for that he and I and all of our family will never be the same. Perhaps in that moment, as people looked at us they might just say, "You know what, you look just like your Father, Abraham."