

"The Council" a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA) 6/15/08

Text: Genesis 12:1-3 (The Call of Abram) 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.'

Romans 4:13-25 (**God's Promise Realized through Faith**) For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

ON THIS FATHER'S DAY, it does seem appropriate to talk about Abraham, the father in faith recognized by three great religions -- A father who was by no means perfect, but who made an effort to listen for God's direction.

We are told Abraham was already old when God told him that if he would move to the Promised Land, God would make of him a great nation. WHAT was God thinking?

You know, there is no evidence in the Genesis story that Abram had even heard of Yahweh, much less worshiped the One God. Abraham and Sarah had spent their entire lives in Mesopotamia, home area for generations of their kin. They knew all the neighbors. Abe had 30 years of perfect attendance at the Greater Tigris-Euphrates Rotary Club. Sarah served on the school board. Granted they lived as nomads on the fringe of Mesopotamian society, moving from water hole to water hole. On the other hand, they were known at every oasis. It might not have been much, but it was home and it was comfortable.

And they were called to step out in faith. And they were given the promise and fact of a blessing, a gift, a promise of fortune and abundance. WHAT was God thinking?

Here is how I imagine God's thoughts:

I imagine the situation shortly after the Flood and the Tower of Babel where God had to separate and disperse all the people dividing them even with different languages. God was feeling stumped. God was upset and full of grief over the corruption and now seemingly indisputable impossibility of God's original vision, God's great plan for humans and for creation.

God was still angry at those first humans for their refusal to follow a simple command: In all of the garden there was just that one tree that they must not eat from." Why couldn't they listen?!" Anger continued as humans began to multiply, to fill the earth outside the Garden, but with growing distortion and corruption. God decided to wipe out all humans, but in the end, relented as Noah's became the chosen family to save the animals and continue the human odyssey anew.

But, as angry as God was, God's sorrow was much worse. In great consternation, God called a Council meeting with all the senior angels. As they gathered, the angels were moved at the sight of God's face. It had lost some of its glow and tears had stained it. God gazed at these beings, created to act on behalf of God and at the command of God, and with power second only to God's own. A core of resolve began to form a determination, somehow, someway, to find a way out of this disaster. God spoke...

"Archangels, Cherubim and Seraphim, as you are aware a terrible disaster has befallen my creation. The focus of vision, the highlight of all my creative work - humans- have rejected their relationship with Me. They have turned away from me and there seems to be nothing more I can do."

The angels voiced their sympathies in a deep undertone - a moan, a requiem on one note, an emanation of empathy for their Lord.

Then God continued. "I will not let this deter me. I desired a creature just slightly lower than my angels upon whom I could lavish my love and blessings, and I will what I will!"

Archangel Michael thought to himself, "Oh man, those foolish humans are in for it now! God's going to erase them from memory and start over with a new improved model." But, Michael was wrong. Mercifully, wondrously wrong.

Instead God set a challenge: "Help me redeem this situation. I would like your suggestions for how to reach my humans. Be as creative as you can, for we cannot interfere with human free will for this is the hallmark of humanity."

There was a quiet fluttering of wings and a pulse in each angel aura as they put holy minds to work for the Almighty.

Finally, a seraphim raised its head, "Holy One, perhaps you could give them a detailed list of rules they must follow to show they have learned their lesson." God shook that holy head sadly, "I will do that, I will give them rules to guide them, but I'm afraid that if they can't obey one command, even 10 of them would truly overwhelm them.

A cherubim spoke next, "Exalted One, could you set them tasks of mercy and goodness that they could accomplish. Then, when they have done enough good, their sin would be overcome?" Again, God shook God's head and explained that having sinned, humans would go on sinning. Good deeds would only make them think they had earned the right to sin.

The discussion continued, and God's holy angels exhausted themselves trying to help God find the answer to this sad problem. Finally, an angel who had remained quiet during the discussion spoke timidly, "Gracious God, I wonder if we may be focused in the wrong direction. Instead of trying to find something humans can do to save themselves, might it not be better to help them become something else? I mean maybe it's not about changing something outside them, something the humans do, but something inside that makes them who they are..."

The angel council fell into deep silence, silence so deep it was like the silence of the time before creation began.

After a blink of eternal time, the voice of God sounded forth with its old vitality, "I appreciate the depth of your analysis. This seems plausible! I will implant a spark of faith in each human. I will make it possible for them to exercise this faith through the events of their lives. And the more they exercise it, the stronger it will grow. This faith will make it possible for them to believe in Me again, and through this belief our relationship can deepen. There's one I have in mind already - Abram. With the seed of faith embedded, I will send him on an impossible journey, but I will promise an extravagant ending, with a nation founded on his children."

Michael squirmed in his seat, and finally voiced a concern. "Holy One, it's just that we've seen how humanity's sin has corrupted not just them, but all of creation. I...I just have doubts about their ability to understand this gracious offering you would give them. Um, even with guidance and special leadership they are likely to try to impose impossible demands on themselves which will ultimately drive them away."

God meditated silently for a moment. Finally, God said, "Ahhh Michael. This will not be a quick fix for my people. I perceive that there will be many up's and down's in our relationship over the coming eons. I feel that this is important for the development of faith in my people though. If this does not work, I will reserve the ultimate solution. In the end only an extraordinary act of grace can save my people from themselves."

God sighed deeply.

"When the time is right I will make the sacrifice only I can make. I will come myself, As my own Son - a part of my very being - to become human. He will teach

them, he will ask them to follow, he will blow on the embers of faith and remind them, over and over, that I do not desire sacrifice from my people, but mercy toward one another. In the end, I will do what I must. Through my Son, I will even give Myself for them, and my Spirit will enable them to believe in Him.

“I will bless the people through my servant Abram. And I will come to bless the people through my very Self, the Son, the Light and Hope. And my people will be blessed, to be a blessing. I do not call them to status and favor, not to privilege and honor. It is not a call to amass blessings for themselves but to be a part of my kin-dom where my holy divine master plan unfolds... the blessing of all my children. In the growing of that imbedded faith, my people will learn to risk, to embrace the needy and vulnerable, to follow in love rather in logic, to honor the words and signs I send, but to honor and love people more. And there will be the gift of the land and the gift of life And the gift of the survival and flourishing of all families.”

With this pronouncement, a gentle hum, like the sound of perfectly tuned harps began. As it grew, the sound was joined by a symphony of exquisitely tuned crystal bells filled the air. The angel choirs picked up the sound and rejoiced in God's ever-present grace.

God looked out on the angels and beyond them to creation. Centered in God's eye were the people God had created with such pleasure and now would redeem with such love.

Many centuries ago an old man received a call. Surprisingly, he left his home and ventured out to a new frontier with only the promise of future blessings. He began with a tired, broken-down body, a barren wife, a few possessions. He did not have even a compass to guide him.

But his nation was blessed, and from that nation came a Savior; and from that Savior, a church; and from that church, people committed to continuing Abram's call.

God smiled. And it was very good.

Amen

*With thanks to Rev. Elsa L. Clark for collaboration on the story.