

Sermon for Sunday, March 12, 2017

FATHER ABRAHAM

Genesis 12:1-4a / Romans 4:13-17

God's call to Abraham, the father of many nations could not be clearer: "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ... And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," God says to Father Abraham. God's call and God's blessing are not a call to exceptionalism. Rather, God's blessing and promise of greatness rest on one non-negotiable condition: the blessing Abraham receives is not for him to keep but to give away. Only if Abraham shares God's blessing with all nations—and *all* here means *all*—will his name be great. Only in the sharing of God's blessing with *all* people will God's promise bear fruit. Abraham has got nothing to do with it. It is entirely God's accomplishment.

But God is not done with God's pronouncement. The promise of blessing also comes with a warning label attached to it: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse," God says. In other words, not welcoming God's blessing as mediated through Father Abraham has consequences. Divine consequences. This, too, is God's business, and God's business alone. We human beings do not get to pronounce blessings and curses on God's behalf. I always thought it rather humbling that the Hebrew root word for "blessing" and "curse" has the same linguistic origin. This ambiguity is yet another reminder that making the distinction which nuance is meant with absolute certainty is simply above our human paygrade.

Having said that, however, I want to make a cautious guess regarding God's "blessing" and "curse." I have a hard time believing that sneaking into Jewish cemeteries under the cover of darkness and vandalizing Jewish graves would qualify as deserving God's blessing. Rather, desecrating the memory of the blessed dead who cannot defend themselves is one of the most cowardly acts imaginable. It is a violation of the dead, a violation of the living who mourn them, and a violation of God whose children they are through Father Abraham.

I also have a hard time imagining that making bomb threats against Jewish schools, Jewish children and Jewish community centers, both in our own city and around the country, qualify as meriting God's blessing. Nor do attitudes that foster a climate of resurgent and virulent anti-Semitism and xenophobia. It is encouraging to know that our interfaith community in St. Louis is vibrant, strong, and steadfast in its support of one another, regardless of which faith tradition we belong to. Their statement that "an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us" surely qualifies as a statement made in the spirit of Father Abraham. It is further encouraging that all one hundred US senators without exception signed a document last week condemning these attacks and threats. It is discouraging, though, that any and all of these things have become a dire necessity.

It is always fascinating to me how context influences the reading of Scripture and how texts, which I have read many times over the span of many years, disclose fresh meanings. The references to Abraham in Paul's letter to the Romans are indisputable but

in light of today's climate, verses 16 and 17 in the fourth chapter caught my attention: "For this reason it depends on faith, in order that God's promise [to Abraham] may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the descendants of Torah 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."

Paul asserts that God's promise of blessing does not merely extend to the Jews, "the descendants of Torah," but also to all who share the faith of Abraham. Well, that would include the followers of Jesus, meaning you and me, people who have come to be known as "Christians." But it would also include our Muslim brothers and sisters who are descendants of Abraham as well through Abraham's son Ishmael. Now, one could object that Islam originated roughly 600 years after Paul wrote these lines and Christianity is much younger. But it is important to note that neither existed in Paul's day. That, after all, family is family. And when it comes to family, the separation of time and place matters not. As all of us at one point or another were immigrants to this country, we all can relate to the importance of family across time and space.

A friend of mine likes to remind me that there are no coincidences in life. So it is perhaps no coincidence that we are reading and contemplating these two Scriptures from Genesis and Romans on the same day that *John Burroughs School* right down the street hosts an interfaith event sponsored by *Arts and Faith St. Louis*, called "The Cave." The title of this multi-media event refers to the *Cave of Machpelah* in Hebron, the burial site of Father Abraham. It is a holy site to Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike who are all "descendants of Abraham." *The Cave* explores our common ancestry and our relationships to one another, and there will be several community-wide events following today's performance (at 2PM, if you are curious and would like to attend) which will help us understand ourselves better in light of our common Abrahamic roots.

The writer of today's Genesis text and the apostle Paul could not be more contemporary in their relevance if they tried. Theirs is an important message which we need to hear afresh and with which we entrust our confidants today as we send them out on their continued journey of faith. In a world and time where what divides us receives more attention than what unites us, we need to hear once again that God's promise of blessing is meant for all people. That it is extended by God's sheer grace. We do not get to refuse to others what God grants for all and there will be consequences if we do. There is a fine line between blessing and curse, which we do not get to define or arbitrate. God's blessing is meant to be shared freely with all. May it be so.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, Ph.D.

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO

March 12, 2017, 2nd Sunday in Lent