Trusted Blessings

Narrative Lectionary Year 1

September 16, 2018

Genesis 12: 1-9 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This week we started our craft/book study group with the book, [Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I’ve Loved](https://katebowler.com/books/). It is written by Kate Bowler of Mennonite background who got involved with the prosperity gospel, ending up interviewing leaders and writing a history of it. The prosperity gospel promises that God will give you your hearts desires, all the good things in life, money, success, health, family, happiness. It comes with a belief that these things come when you follow God faithfully and you will be rewarded. You will be blessed. Kate believed and lived in this bounty until the day, at age 30 with a loving husband and baby, she received a call that she had cancer and had emergency surgery the same day. Her foundation was rocked and she no longer felt blessed. The problem with this kind of belief is that when something bad happens, one is led to believe their faith is not strong enough or they did something wrong.

Looking at our passage today, one could be led to believe that the message of the story of Abram is one of such election. We may see Abram was chosen because he had lived well and God was going to reward him. Why would God choose one person, one family, one nation, over everyone and everywhere else? It doesn’t seem fair. God chooses Abram, but not because he has done anything to deserve it. God works through Abram not only to be blessed, but to be a blessing. The blessing is for the sake of the whole world. Abraham, as he is later named, is a conduit of blessing for all the families of the earth.

Abram in the story is an incredible person. He has such faith and trust that when called to leave his land, his kindrid, his father’s home, he does. Even though he doesn’t know the final destination. In his time, family and community is incredibly important especially as you get older, as it is the family that will take care of you. But Abram picks up and goes with his immediate family, leaving his extended family and familiarity behind. How many of us would be willing to do that? Has there been times in your life when you have left for somewhere new on faith and hope? Have you felt the blessing of such leaps of faith?

What is blessing? One might identify a blessing as a good gift. It seems to me that it is something more than a gift, there is a sacredness about it. We feel blessed when life is good. When we have what we need, food, shelter, education, health, love. When we are blessed, we can be a blessing too. We can also find, that people who do not have these same kind of blessings or as many of these basic needs as we may be used to, those who are poor or less privileged, can be generous in offering blessing as well. We experienced this kind of generous blessing yesterday when a group of us went to the Treaty 4 pow wow with folk from Indigenous Christian Fellowship(ICF). One of the traditions in a pow wow is a giveaway. A group of people went around the circle of the grounds with gifts of blankets and comforters of all kinds. Sam and Delia were handed a large comforter, and weren’t quite prepared to receive a gift, not understanding in that moment what was happening. The person said it’s a giveaway, take it, and shook their hands. Delia later shared how she was overwhelmed with the generous offer of this indigenous person giving this white woman and black man who are a couple a gift. She named it as a sacred moment, which makes it a real blessing.

Abram finds that his life, his faith is not about sitting around and waiting to be blessed, or even doing good and right things and waiting for God’s blessings as a result. He learns that every choice he makes, everything he does, others will either be blessed or cursed. This is a message for us. What would our communities, the world be like if we truly considered our choices and actions in the context of whether the impact will be a blessing or curse on others. Some actions may bless some and curse or cause pain or difficulty for others. If this is the case then we are not being a blessing through this action. Things are not simple.

We can even look at Abram’s call by God to get up and move and be blessed with a land to live in. The land he ended up in was Canaan. It was not unoccupied land. It is the historical and present land of the Palestinians. We could look at this initial action of Abram, guided by God as leading to the present territorial conflict in the middle east. Not much of a blessing at all. What do we do with that?? I would like to believe that God’s intent was not for Abraham and his descendants to conquer and fight for the land. That is not being a blessing. Sometimes greed and human brokenness lead to different results than what God or love may intend. This awareness can call us to an examination of empire and colonialism and working to right the wrongs of this conquering mentality that has hurt so many. Abram was a stranger in a strange land. As a stranger, he held on to his cultural and religious beliefs and traditions. Our community of faith, our historical roots are from a stranger in a stranger land who was following God. So when strangers come to our land, with their faith and traditions, we too can be blessed by their presence in our community and offer hospitality and love to be a blessing to them.

In some ways, yesterday at the pow wow, I felt like a stranger in a strange land. We felt very welcomed, indeed, the MC also made it clear this was a gathering for all, even as he acknowledged the depression and oppression they experience, this was a time of celebration. There was an inter-tribal dance at the beginning, after the grand entry, which means anyone from any tribe can dance. Bonnie went with Darlene, one of the older women from ICF to dance and a few others of our group went as well. I felt shy and unsure about joining them, I didn’t feel it was my place. Later in the second dance, the MC announced that anyone can join in and you didn’t need to be in regalia. Near the end of the day, Darlene, who had been sharing with us some of the meanings behind the dances, said at the next inter-tribal dance she wanted take me out with her. Betty, who coordinates the kitchen and cooking duties at the ICF breakfasts, said to me: it is important for healing that we dance together. This was really helpful to hear, it was a real welcoming of a ‘stranger’ and another blessing. There was not another inter-tribal dance before we left, but I will be sure to join in next time!

When we look at the whole story in Genesis so far, we have moved from cosmic, with the creation story, Noah, and the tower of Babel,to community or family with the story of Abram and Sarai. There is a real contrast between the descendants of Noah, the ones who built the tower of Babel in chapter 11 and Abram. Abram puts his trust in God’s guidance rather than human device. The builders of the tower thought they could reach heaven and usurp God’s power. The builders sought to make a name for themselves but Abram trusted God’s promise that God would make his name great. Abram was willing to go where God led him while the builders of the tower huddled close together and built out of fear of being scattered. As can often be the case when we follow our fears, their actions brought those fears to fruition as they were dispersed across the land in groups with those who now spoke the same language. Abram was willing to let God lead him into new relationships while the tower builders sought to close themselves off in a guarded fortress. Finally, Abram had the patience to trust God in the long term while the tower builders took no thought to how their actions would affect generations in the long term. Abram is an example of faith and trust on so many levels and is a person of faith to learn from and be inspired by to be blessed to be a blessing.

Shalom and blessing are connected. Shalom is a state in which everyone has what they need to be flourishing. Every blessing we have is a little bit of shalom. Underlying it all is the blessings of God’s unconditional love and presence with us. When Kate received her diagnosis of cancer and needed surgery right away. She did not feel blessed. She did have love and support of friends and family around her, and while she may not have named it at the time, that is a blessing. It is God’s presence and love in our lives.

May we know we are blessed and be a blessing to those around us and whom we come in contact with, that God’s love may be known in and through us.