Genesis 12:1-4a Bill Uetricht 2 Lent 3.5.23

I think most of you know that the religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have as one of their original and primary heroes the man known as Abram or Abraham. Each one of these religions focuses on a man who was asked to leave everything familiar and head to a land that God eventually will show him, a land that he has no knowledge of.

Can you imagine leaving behind everything that is familiar to you and taking a job in another place, a place that you don't even know the name of, don't know where it is? In 1996, Bev and I got a call from you all here at First Lutheran. Part of the appeal of the call to us was that we had been here before. We had interviewed in Detroit, Philadelphia, and Cleveland with communities of faith that we had no knowledge of. We were very used to the inner city as we had spent ten years in it in Toledo. But apart from Detroit, these were cities that we had zero knowledge of. Muskegon—we had been here before. We had spent a year in this church, loved the snowy winter, were awed by the Big Lake, and treasured the people we had met. Muskegon was a known quantity.

Abraham had no idea where he was going. He only knew that God was leading the way and that God started his journey with some promises: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great."

Now as I read this story about Abraham, I hear the nation of Israel finding a way to see who they are as part of some larger narrative. This story probably came into usage later in Israel's history. Perhaps as they were going through a great struggle, they wanted to know that they, a small potato in the huge sack of nations, had a beginning in some kind of greatness or at least the promise of greatness. I think we have to get that this may be a matter of Israel looking back, trying to discover strength for the journey ahead, or we will turn this story, as is too often

the case, into a prescription for how the modern day nation of Israel should be treated.

God tells Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you, and the ones who curse you I will curse.” Some today have literalized this. Paula who has just returned from Israel and Palestine can tell you the impact upon Palestinians that this literalization has had. Israel is to be blessed by us. And those who speak a word of critique of Israel must be cursed. The Bible certainly holds a high view of the people named Israel, as it holds a high view of the church. But no nation, no institution, is exempt from critique. It is destructive to use stories that are attempts to give people a sense of their greatness in a world where they weren’t very great as a means for avoiding the critique and helping people amass power. We are constantly telling you that you have worth, that you matter, that your beginnings are rooted in grace and love, in God choosing you. But don’t think for one moment that you can use that message to beat up other people. God forbid, Paul would say.

Well, that in some ways was a bit of a side trip, but something I think about whenever I hear people talking about blessing modern-day Israel or cursing it. And it is something that you would definitely think about, if you went to Palestine, where there is much oppression.

But I need to get back to this story that is at the center of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the story of a guy who leaves all that is familiar to go to a land whose name and location he doesn’t even know. All three religions focus on the power of promise and the invitation to trust. At the heart of religious understanding is not certainty, but risk.

A lot of religious people forget this or never understood it. They think that being religious is a matter of being given a briefcase or a computer full of information that they must digest and integrate into themselves, turning them into religious experts. The task is to get more religious expertise, so that you can help others get that expertise, too.

You figure out life, and then you teach other people how to figure out life. You get sure about things so that you can help other people get sure about them. You learn the language, the lingo, the sayings, the proverbs. You know, “God will never give you more than you can handle; everything happens for a reason; she’s in a better place now.”

But all of that doesn’t seem to coincide with the story that is at the center of the great traditions. According to the Abraham/Abram story, life is much riskier. Promise is different than guarantee. About marriage, Joseph Sittler says, "The heart of marriage is a promise. On the face of it, it's a crazy promise: two people who only have a partial understanding of each other stand up and make this bizarre statement that they are going to cherish each other for a lifetime ... To many people this seems like a mad and risky thing to do.”

It *is* mad and risky. Who knows what the future will bring? Who knows what the other will become, what will happen to him or her? To commit to someone else is a risky thing. Commitment is led by promise, and promise is not a sure thing. And we see that clearly in the Abraham story. Much of the Abraham narrative is about the threat to promise. Your nation is going to be great, big. Well, you and Sarah are really old. How can you have any kids, much less grandkids, or great grandkids? Maybe the promise won’t come to fruition.

That’s the way life is. There’s always a threat to the promise. You are baptized and are told that you have an identity as a child of God that cannot be taken away from you. You are told that in some ways you are pure possibility. Then what happens? Well, according to the Jesus’ story, you are cast into the wilderness.

Wildernesses are threats to the promise. And truthfully, we all end up in the wilderness. COVID was one giant wilderness. We hung out there for a while. It threatened our sense of who we are, casting some of us into depression, causing some of us to wonder about the

goodness of life and God. And let's tell the truth. Some of us never left the wilderness. We took up residence there. That's always the risk. Life can go sour. It can eat away at our ability to move forward. We can stay stuck. There's always the chance that the promise won't be fulfilled. Promise is a risky thing. All the great religions start with a risky thing.

My atheist friends will sometimes seek from me some kind of guarantee for this faith stuff. There is no guarantee. It's a risk. It's a leap. And Abraham took it. Christianity, Judaism, Islam—they all start with a story of one who did the crazy thing of leaping, leaping without knowing where he was going to land. For all those religions, it begins in trust. Paul highlights that when he writes in Romans, quoting Genesis: "Abraham trusted God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Trust is what makes for righteousness. Trust is what God wants in a relationship.

I think that is in part what Jesus in John is trying to tell Nic at night, Nicodemus who came to him at night. Nic represents people from John's audience who are so-so about this Jesus stuff. They are on the fence. And it's understandable. John's audience included folks who could face persecution if they left a certain form of Judaism to embrace fully the Jesus kind of Judaism. For John, the light hasn't yet come on for them, for Nic. And it won't come on for them or for us until they and we get this: it's not about you, or me, or us. And Jesus makes that less than perfectly clear when he says: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," or as some have translated it, "born again."

Now, this is not an invitation from John's Jesus to have a warm, religious experience, to go to the crusade and raise your hand in order to give your life to Jesus. John or Jesus would not understand that. Such an understanding is given to us from something like the American revivalist movement. No, to be born from above, or again, is something

that comes from outside of you. You weren't responsible for your first birth. You aren't responsible for your second birth. This, as the scholars would put it, comes from revelation. Or as Lutherans would put it, this comes from God.

For you who think that you are responsible for everything in life, this will come as shock. And Nicodemus, whom I really admire, didn't understand it. The deepest things in life aren't from you. They are from God. They are from above. It takes a new imagination to grasp this. In essence, it's about promise, a promise that invites risk and trust.

And what Jesus' John says the promise is all about is captured in what is one of the best-known Biblical passages of all: "For God loved the world in such a way that he gave his only Son." The center of the promise is love. That is what the whole story is about, the story that started with Abraham. All religion that is good religion is fundamentally about that promise. It's all about love. "God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that it might be saved through him." Jesus is the promise in a person. He was sent from God. And the promise he brings is not condemnation, but freedom (salvation), love. It's this promise that brings new life. It is this promise that brings us a birth from above, that makes us born again.

Is there a guarantee to that promise? Nope. Will you always know where you are going to end up. Nope. But this I know, or more appropriately, this I trust. Life is a whole lot more interesting, much deeper, more meaningful, a lot more fun when you risk your life, when you wager your life, on love. What Joseph Sittler says about marriage is probably true about life, "The risk is the romance."