
May they Find in You a Blessing

Genesis 12.1-9

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 8, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Every two or three years I go away on my own for a morning and write my own obituary. I've probably done it half a dozen times now. The whole point is to look ahead a few years and write the most glowing things you could ever wish someone to say about you. You look at the mundane and unremarkable details of your life to this point and you see them as merely introductory material to the glory that is to come. (I commended the exercise to a friend of mine who's a monk. He struggled to take it seriously, and insisted on saying "Died peacefully in his bed, surrounded by two of his favourite wives.") Writing it all down usually takes me about 3 hours. When you've finished you look back at this marvellous person you've described and wonder, "Why can't I live like that now? If that's what I admire, why isn't that who I am? What's *stopping* me?" What begins as an exercise in pride and vainglory ends as a humbling act of confession and renewal.

I wonder what it would be like to write an obituary for Abraham. Maybe it might begin a little bit like this. God had a plan. That plan was to be in relationship: to be a friend, a sharer of joys and sorrows, a faithful and persevering companion. And so there was creation – sun, moon, stars and all the rest – and the crown of that creation was humanity, expressed as Adam and Eve. "Adam" means earth and "Eve" means life. Humanity is the place where the life that comes from the heart of God most actively intersects with the earth that comes from the hand of God. This then was God's good intention: out of matter and spirit to make humanity, and in relation to humanity to express the heart of God. That was Plan A.

But Plan A was foiled. Sin entered the story. God's intention had a devastating setback. The human relationship with God became one of deceit and suspicion and fear – and, as the story of Cain killing his brother Abel shows, human relationships with one another became ones of distrust and envy and violence. This distrust and envy and violence and deceit and suspicion and fear became so overwhelming that God lost patience and decided to wipe the slate clean and begin all over again.

So there was a second plan, Plan B. This time the plan wasn't to be in relationship with the whole of humanity from the word go. This time the plan was to find one righteous person, and build from there. Plan B was called Noah. Noah was the one righteous man whose family God saved from the carnage of the Flood. It's amazing Noah's Ark is the number one Bible story read to children because it's the most wholesale destruction of human beings and creation ever described. But Plan B didn't work out either. Noah fouled it up within a couple of verses of getting off the ark. More seriously, when people moved towards civilization in cities, we have the story of the Tower of Babel and its account of the way people resisted God's gift of diversity by trying to force humanity into one grand scheme.

So the plan for a relationship with all humanity failed and the plan for a relationship through one righteous man failed, and God came up with a third plan. And this is where Abraham comes in. God's third plan was a relationship with one people, the family of Abraham. In a way Plan C is a combination of the previous two. It has the corporate dimension of the first plan and the holiness dimension of the second plan. Abraham's children are to be God's holy people, and through them God will come into relationship with all peoples once again. This is Plan C, and Plan C is what the Old Testament is all about.

That's how Abraham's obituary begins. But what would be a perfect ending for Abraham's obituary? Of course it would include a catalogue of his achievements, the prize for Best Patriarch, the prize for the longest walk in the Bible, and no doubt the prize for the best beard in the Old Testament. But wouldn't it be amazing if there were to be a person who appeared and expressed a perfect relationship between God and humanity? Wouldn't it be amazing if a person came along who represented the new creation embodied in Adam and Eve, the holiness and righteousness represented in Noah, and the corporate dimension of the chosen people represented by Abraham? In other words a person who fulfilled plans A, B and C?

That's what the Christian faith proclaims. God's plan for and promises to Adam and Noah are not invalidated by the promises to Abraham, but fulfilled in the coming of Christ. Jesus is a Jew who validates all the previous

plans of God. Jesus is all three plans restored. He is the new creation like Adam and Eve, he is the one righteous man like Noah, and he is the embodiment and inaugurator of the chosen people like Abraham.

Let's look a bit more closely at what God says to Abraham in these vital first three verses of Genesis chapter 12. These three verses are so crucial we could call them the manifesto of the Old Testament. If you look carefully, you see God makes seven promises to Abraham. Number one "I will make of you a great nation," number two "I will bless you," number three "I will make your name great," number four "You will be a blessing." Number five "I will bless those who bless you," number six "The one who curses you I will curse;" number seven "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Now there's a great deal in this sevenfold blessing that excites some people and equally dismays others. There are broadly two issues at stake.

The first is that since it follows the words "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" it seems like a title deed to the real estate called Canaan. Abraham's call and Abraham's blessing are about land and family, and, so the argument goes, to say today that these words aren't really about the land of Israel is as absurd as saying today that these words aren't about the Jews. In the debate over Israel and Palestine today, there's no doubt this passage is a hot potato – or at least a hot falafel.

The second issue is the so-called prosperity gospel movement. If you switch on your TV you don't need to browse too many channels before you see a man in a smart suit walking around a packed auditorium proclaiming that God wants to bless you, and that blessing means health and wealth, and that if you don't have health or you don't have wealth it's because you haven't asked for them, and what you need to do now, besides sending a donation to this number appearing on your screen, is to name that blessing and claim that blessing, just as God granted the request of Jabez in First Chronicles who called out and said "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! And keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." It's not surprising that the prosperity gospel is popular for those in tough circumstances, and is catching on rapidly in Africa, because a lot of people could use a whole lot more health and wealth.

But the theological claims of the Zionist movement and the prosperity gospel need to look a little more closely at the sevenfold promise God makes to Abraham. The middle one of God's seven promises says, "You will be a blessing." Not you will *receive* a blessing – but you will *be* a blessing. And if Abraham didn't get it, or needed a little bit more help identifying what this interesting phrase might mean, it's repeated in more detail in God's seventh and climactic promise at the end: "*In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" Here we discover what blessing is really all about. Blessing is not fundamentally about the security that comes through more land, more children, more wives, camels, donkeys, SUVs, pages on your CV, university degrees, houses, holidays, awards, endowments, guns, clothes or body enhancements. Blessing is fundamentally about others being able to trace their sense of wellbeing and peace and joy to *you*. God is saying to Abraham, "I wanted all humankind to be a source of wellbeing and peace and joy to one another and to me. But it didn't work out like that. So I thought I'd try to condense all that wellbeing and peace and joy in one person. But that didn't work either. So I'm going to try to convey all the wellbeing and peace and joy I have to give the world through one special people, and that people will be the people I give the world through you."

So the three questions we can ask ourselves about whether a blessing is true and one we should rightly seek derive from the three plans of God set out in the first twelve chapters of Genesis. Question one: is this blessing fundamentally something everyone can have, is it based in my common humanity? (That's the Adam and Eve question.) Question two: is this blessing fundamentally about being holy, being shaped and fitted to serve God in body, mind and spirit? (That's the Noah question.) And question three: is this blessing one I am expecting to share with others, or is it something I'm expecting to keep to myself? (That's the Abraham question.)

Let's see how theological Zionism shapes up to these three questions. (Don't get me wrong: I'm not questioning the legitimacy of the State of Israel; I'm simply asking whether it's fair to describe the State of Israel as God's blessing in the light of Genesis chapter 12, as a lot of people do.) Ok, here goes. Is the State of Israel a place where all people can find blessing, or just a few? Is the State of Israel fundamentally about making a holy people? Is the State of Israel looking to share wellbeing and peace and joy with others, or simply keep them to itself? Those seem to be the questions. And as for the prosperity gospel, Are our prayers for health and wealth

matched by prayers for the health and wealth of others across the whole spread of humanity? Are such prayers matched by a longing to be holy? Is that health and wealth something we are expecting to share with others, or is it something we're expecting to keep to ourselves? I'm not going to answer any of these questions. But I'm not going to hide the fact that some of them answer themselves.

The point of blessing, in Genesis, in Jesus, and today, is that we should become people through whom others find wellbeing and peace and joy. God's most important promise to Abraham was, "Through you all the peoples of the earth will find a blessing." And before the Church becomes too self-righteous about criticizing Zionism or the prosperity gospel we need to ask ourselves the same questions. Is our gospel and church life something everyone can have? Is it making us holy? And is it fundamentally a shared thing, or something we see as primarily for us as individuals? If God has given the Holy Land to Israel, it is not so as to keep Israel safe but so that Israel may be a blessing for all the families of the earth. If God has given you prosperity, it's not to protect you from others, but so that your life, your home and your resources may become ways in which others may find a blessing.

I want to take you back to that obituary I mentioned at the beginning. Yes, an obituary is full of events and achievements and births, marriages and deaths. But if you're anything like me, you skip ahead past the ponderous narrative to the final paragraph that says something like, "above all, she will be remembered for her..." – and then it describes what she was really like. And that's not about skill or intelligence or longevity or wealth; it's about character. And when I read an obituary that says, "Above all, she will be remembered for being a channel of wellbeing and peace and joy," or, "God was so transparently at work in his life that you felt, if you stayed close to him, you'd keep close to God," I think, "I'll have one of those please. I'd like an obituary like that thank you very much."

Would your last paragraph say that about you? Would it say "she was a channel of wellbeing and peace and joy"? Would it say "God was so transparently at work in his life that you felt, if you stayed close to him, you'd keep close to God." If not, why not? And with the time God has left for you, what are you going to do about it?

Because in the end, all the earned or honorary degrees you receive and the money you make or give away and the property you own or bequeath and even the marriages you enter and the children you have aren't going to matter – at least not in the way that this matters. Others will know if you've received a blessing if they can look back and say that you've been a channel of wellbeing and peace and joy to them – that in you, they have found a blessing, that, close to you, they have felt themselves close to God. That's a call to *every* person, and it's the only prosperity God's interested in. If you have that kind of blessing, you don't need any other kind of security. That's something to be named – and something to be claimed. Are you a channel of wellbeing and peace and joy? Do you *want* to be? Do you want to receive God's blessing? Does anything else *matter*?

Some questions answer themselves.