

So first, a confession. Yesterday was a pastoral first for me. I had both a funeral and a wedding on the same day. In the midst of all the prep time, energy, and emotion for those things, old Abram got sort of a short shrift. But, for better or worse here we go.

Last week we hung out with Noah through the flood and the restart for creation. Somewhere in the midst of all that, God realized it didn't really work. That the hearts of people would continue to be inclined towards evil and violence.

But God made a vow to stick with humanity anyway. There's a pattern in these ancient stories that set the template for the rest of the story. We've been talking about that pattern in confirmation.

The pattern goes like this: people mess up, there are consequences that threaten God's creation, but God finds a way to make a new beginning. God did that for Adam and Eve after the forbidden fruit debacle.

God did it again for Cain after he killed his brother. God did it again in the story of Noah and again in the Tower of Babel story.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis are called the primeval history in the biblical story.

The stories are impossible to date. Some people of faith accept them as factually accurate. Others look more for the meaning of the story, irrespective of whether they're factually accurate or not.

Either way, that pattern is set from the beginning and it defines the pattern of the overarching biblical story of God and God's people. It's a pattern with names like redemption, salvation, grace. Pertinent to today's story might be the word blessing.

Today's story represents the beginning of the next phase of God's redemptive work.

From here on, God will work through one man and woman and their family. This story is the springboard, not only for the rest of the Old Testament, but really for the whole biblical story.

First off, why Abraham? We're not told. Maybe God knew he would be faithful, as he ultimately proved to be. But we're not told. Being chosen by God doesn't really seem to have a lot of rhyme or reason.

That will also be key for the rest of the story. We like fairness. We like things happening to us on the basis of merit. But that's just not how God works.

Sometimes the story of religion seems like thousands of years of humans trying to prove their merit...and God saying essentially, will you never grasp this grace thing?

Abram is chosen just by God's grace.

But being chosen by God is a scarier prospect than we may want to believe. God's first words to Abram are go...leave your country and your kindred and your father.

In the kind of society in which Abram lived, that meant leaving not just what you knew and loved, but it meant leaving your safety net.

Now, that might have been a bigger ask if Abram had been poor. Or if he'd been asked to leave everything behind. Neither of those things were true. Abram and Sarai took their possessions, Abram's nephew, and their servants.

But still, they are going off into the unknown. And it was not particularly safe. Twice in a foreign city Abram got worried that powerful men would try to kill him and take his apparently still beautiful wife for themselves.

So they told the rulers that Sarah was his sister. Neither time did that work out well.

Along the way in the story, Abraham and Sarah lose faith for a bit. They concoct a plan for Abraham to have a son by Sarah's servant Hagar.

It was a sort of work around when it didn't look like God was going to come through. That union resulted in a son named Ishmael.

You've probably heard that Abraham is considered the father of three faiths. For Jews and Christians, that inheritance is through the later son, Isaac. But for Muslims, it's Ishmael.

And we should not forget that although in our faith Isaac was the child of the promise, in the biblical story, Ishmael too was blessed by God.

OK, so let's look at the blessings promised to Abram. If this family is to be the next phase of God's covenant and commitment to humanity, how will that work?

God promises three blessings. The first is land. OK. Having your own land is going to provide a base...a place to call home. But it's not super obvious how that will help God keep that commitment to all humanity.

The second blessing is that Abraham and Sarah will have many descendants and will be a great nation. OK, great. More people for God to work through.

Although if we remember the story back before Noah...and then later with the tower of Babel – it mostly seems like more people just means more problems. There's also the teensy tiny problem that Abram and Sarai are old and have no kids.

The third promise is where the gold is...God will bless Abraham so that through him and his family all the families of the earth will be blessed. That's how this family will be God's next move to rescue and bless humanity.

Later events will show us how that happens. Next week we'll hear about Joseph, Abraham and Sarah's grandson. Joseph will literally save his family and all the families in the region from a famine.

At Mt. Sinai God will call Israel to be a priestly kingdom – to represent God to the world.

Ultimately, Jesus is the final fulfillment of the blessing.

That's where we come in. We have received a new blessing through our adoption into Christ's death and resurrection.

That blessing no longer includes land – there are no boundaries in this new blessing. There isn't a nation – all people are included. There is no longer Greek nor Jew, male nor female, and so on. Christ removed all those divisions.

We are blessed with a new life, a new creation.

But then the call to be a blessing to others remains. God's work to bless the world shifted from one family and one nation to all God's people. That call now includes us.

How will we bless all the families of the earth? How have we done so?

Over the centuries our church has done so by building and supporting hospitals, schools, disaster relief, mosquito netting for malaria protection, building wells for clean water.

We have opened food pantries and clothing closets and supported them financially. We have volunteered at soup kitchens and done food drives. We have made quilts and put together hygiene kits and given out school supplies.

We have advocated and accompanied immigrants and upheld the dignity and humanity of all God's people.

We have worshipped in places like homeless shelters and prisons – places where people desperately long to hear the good news that God's grace is even for them.

As individuals we have found ways to be a blessing to others in our everyday work and life.

It's easy to get down on the church for its shortcomings. It's always easy to find more we think we should be doing.

But you know, sometimes it's worth celebrating all the ways the church has been a blessing to all the families of the world.

And to give thanks for the immense blessing it is to have the opportunity to be a blessing.