

Sermon March 5, 2023

Trinity Cathedral—Gen.12.1-4

The Rev. Mel Schlachter

I READ THAT ANOTHER TEXT OF GENESIS WAS DUG UP IN LOWER EGYPT RECENTLY. HERE IS TODAY'S LESSON IN IT:

THE LORD SAID TO MILDRED, "GO FROM YONKERS AND KINDRED AND YOUR FATHER'S HOUSE (YOU ARE HAVING TROUBLE WITH THEM ANYWAY) TO THE FARM THAT I WILL SHOW YOU IN NEBRASKA. I WILL MAKE OF YOU A GREAT FAMILY, AND I WILL BLESS YOU AND MAKE YOUR NAME GREAT IN ADAMS AND NUCKOLLS COUNTIES, SO THAT YOU WILL BE A BLESSING. I WILL BLESS THOSE WHO BLESS YOU AND THE ONE WHO CURSES YOU I WILL CURSE, AND IN YOU ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH WILL BE BLESSED."

I DON'T KNOW WHAT KIND OF VOICE MY MOTHER HEARD ON THE WAY TO MARRYING THIS SERVICEMAN, BUT IT WAS ENOUGH TO SHOOT HER OUT OF NEW YORK ORBIT INTO A FARMHOUSE WITH AN OUTHOUSE, A HAND PUMP IN THE KITCHEN FOR WATER, AND INITIALLY NO ELECTRICITY. SHE SAID, "THOSE WERE THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF MY LIFE."

SOMETIMES GOD LEADS US OUT, SOMETIMES PUSHES US OUT, INTO A NEW DIRECTION, WITH THE PROMISE TO BE WITH US AND BLESS US IN THIS NEW LIFE. GOD'S BLESSING HERE IS MORE IN THE FUTURE THAN THE PRESENT, MORE PROMISE THAN REALITY. NO DETAILS. DETACH. TRUST ME. LITERARY CRITIC NORTHRUP FRYE ONCE SAID, "WE BELONG TO SOMETHING BEFORE WE ARE ANYTHING." DETACHMENT? MORE LIKE WRENCHING, TEARING A BOND. REMINDS ME OF THAT COFFEE CUP YOU CAN GET AT NATIONAL PARKS, WITH A FRIENDLY BEAR WEARING MOOSE ANTLERS, SAYING "TRUST ME, I AM NOT A BEAR."

ABRAM CAME FROM HARAN, WHICH MEANS "HIGHWAY" OR "CROSSROADS." HOW FITTING. YONKERS MEANT CROSSROADS TOO, ESPECIALLY FOR A YOUNG WOMAN MAKING BIG DECISIONS. ABRAM DISOBEYED GOD BY NOT CUTTING ALL THE TRACES—HE TOOK ALONG HIS NEPHEW LOT. MOM TOOK KINDRED ALSO TO REMIND HER THAT HER BLOOD STILL PUMPED NEW YORK. TWO KIN—SHE HAD GULDEN'S MUSTARD SENT IN (THEY DIDN'T SELL THAT IN NEBRASKA). AND THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH. THERE WEREN'T MANY EPISCOPAL CHURCHES IN NEBRASKA. WHEN ON THE FARM WE LIVED A GOOD LONG WAY FROM CHURCH, BUT WE WERE THERE EVERY SUNDAY, WITH WHATEVER WEATHER.

SO WHAT IS A BLESSING? BIBLICALLY, IT MEANS PHYSICAL VIGOR, FERTILITY (AS THE ANGEL BLESSES MARY), SECURITY, AND SUCCESS IN ONE'S UNDERTAKING. YOU ARE FLOURISHING.

AND IT "INVOLVES A RELATIONSHIP," SAID THEOLOGIAN MATTHEW FOX FORTY YEARS AGO IN HIS BOOK ORIGINAL BLESSING. "...ONE DOES NOT BLESS WITHOUT INVESTING SOMETHING OF ONESELF INTO THE RECEIVER."

SO A CURSE MEANS HUNGER, NO CHILDREN OR THINGS NOT GOING WELL IN GENERAL, AND ALIENATION FROM THE COMMUNITY.

IN THE GENESIS STORIES LEADING UP TO THIS ONE, SOMEONE OBSERVED THAT GOD'S REMEDIES DO NOT SEEM TO WORK. DOING MORE CURSING. HE HAD TO FIRE HIS LIVE-IN GARDENERS; PUNISH HARD ONE OF THEIR KIDS; FLOOD THE EARTH AND DESTROY JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING ON IT; AND THEN KNOCK DOWN A TOWER AND SEND EVERYONE OFF UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER. OFFER 4 ON PUNISHMENT AS A WORKABLE SOLUTION.

SO HE PLUCKS A GUY OUT OF MESOPOTAMIA AND PUTS DIVINE MONEY ON BLESSING, WHICH THE ALMIGHTY WILL BET ON FOR THE REST OF THE BIBLE.

YOU AND I, OUR CHURCH—WE INHERIT THE CHARGE TO BLESS ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH. IN THE FIRST GENERATION CHURCH, THEY KNEW THEY WERE A SMALL CULT, SO ABRAHAM'S BLESSING BECOMES THE PUSH FOR INCLUDING GENTILES (IE, EVERYONE ON EARTH BUT JEWS) IN THE CHURCH.

OF COURSE JESUS' BLESSINGS WOULD STILL BE RINGING IN THEIR EARS TOO: BLESSED ARE THE POOR, BLESSED ARE THE MEEK, BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN, BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS....

THESE BLESSINGS REMIND US THAT JESUS KNEW GOD'S CHARGE TO ABRAHAM "IN YOU ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH WILL BE BLESSED." FOR JESUS, THERE ARE NO OUTSIDERS. HE INVESTED HIS WHOLE SELF IN BRINGING OUTSIDERS TO THE CENTER OF THE SOCIAL FABRIC—HEALING FOLKS WITH MALADIES WHICH MADE THEM RELIGIOUSLY UNCLEAN AND SOCIALLY UNAPPROACHABLE: PEOPLE WITH BIZARRE DEMONS; A STORY ABOUT TAKING CARE OF SOMEONE THAT PUT YOU AT RISK; SCORNE TAX COLLECTORS, ON AND ON. JESUS KNEW NO OUTSIDERS. "ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH."

IS SOMEONE OR A GROUP BEYOND THE PALE FOR YOU? MY MOM WAS, WITH MY DAD'S LARGE CLAN FOR A WHILE: "WASN'T THERE ANY GIRLS GOOD ENOUGH IN NEBRASKA FOR MELVIN THAT HE HAD TO GO TO NEW YORK? AND SHE TALKS FUNNY."

WHO IS BEYOND YOUR PALE, A CIRCLE OF LIFE THAT YOU WOULD SCRATCH IN THE SAND?

I STRUGGLE THIS SEASON WITH MANY STATE LEGISLATORS, WHO SEEM DETERMINED TO CURSE NOT BLESS SO MANY PEOPLE.

ELLIE AND I HAVE A GRANDSON BY ONE OF HER DAUGHTERS WHO HAS BEEN GOING THROUGH A TRANSGENDER TRANSITION FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS. WE ARE PLEASED TO SEE HIM THRIVING, WHEN SEVERAL YEARS AGO HE WAS DEPRESSED, NOT WORKING WELL IN SCHOOL, NOR ENJOYING OTHER ACTIVITY. HE HAS BLOSSOMED. HE'S NOW A FRESHMAN IN COLLEGE. ALONG THE WAY HE HAS HAD SUPPORTIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL PEOPLE, MEDICAL CONSULTATIONS, LOVING PARENTS, AND A CARING GRANDMOTHER WHO KEPT GETTING HIS NEW, SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT, NAME WRONG.

BUT WE WORRY ABOUT THE FUTURE, KNOWING THAT FULLY HALF OF TRANS PEOPLE GET ASSAULTED AT SOME TIME. AND LAWS ARE GETTING PASSED ALL OVER WHICH TREAT TRANS PEOPLE AS LEPERS WERE IN JESUS' DAY.

"ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH" INCLUDES THE TRANS PEOPLE FOR US TO BLESS. IT ALSO INCLUDES OUR LEGISLATORS FOR US TO INVOLVE OURSELVES WITH AND BLESS TOO. HIS MOM ACTUALLY DID THAT WITH THEIR REPRESENTATIVE. ALL THE FAMILIES.

WE LIVE IN A TIME OF SOME FEARFULNESS. A LEGISLATOR I SPOKE WITH WAS AFRAID. SAYING THE WORD TRANSGENDER MEANT YOU WOULD CATCH IT, LIKE THE EBOLA VIRUS. SO HE DIDN'T WANT CHILDREN TO HEAR THE WORD.

WE PEOPLE OF BLESSING HAVE A JOB TO DO IN THIS ATMOSPHERE. MATTHEW FOX AGAIN: "BLESSING DELIVERS BECAUSE IT BUILDS TRUST AND PRIDE AND HOPE—ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS BY WHICH A PEOPLE CAN BE RESPONSIBLE INSTRUMENTS OF A BLESSING GOD."

SO WHO DO YOU CARE ENOUGH ABOUT TO BLESS? AND WHAT STRANGER WILL YOU INVEST YOURSELF IN, IN SOME WAY, TO CARRY A BLESSING? THIS IS WHY WE FEED THE HUNGRY AND HEAL THE SICK, WORK AS CHAPLAINS IN HARD PLACES LIKE HOSPITALS, POLICE DEPARTMENTS, THE ARMY. IN OUR LIVES CAN BE HOPE FOR OTHERS, A BLESSING FOR THOSE NOW ON THE OUTSIDE, BECAUSE YOU AND I KNOW HOW CHRIST HAS COME CLOSE TO US AND WE HAVE BEEN BLESSED. YOU HAVE NOT BEEN CURSED BUT BLESSED. NOW TAKE THAT BLESSING TO ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH.