

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Lent 2, Genesis 12:1-6 *Trust On Your Way*

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The Rev. Dr. Robin L. Carden

Many of you, not all of you, but many of you are here this morning, in Leelanau County, because you worked towards the dream of retiring here for many years. At some point in your life you visited Northern Michigan and something about it captured your heart. And when your heart was captured a seed was planted and your dream began to grow. For many years you planned and prepared and you worked and you saved. You watched the real estate ads and drove around looking at property on weekend trips north. When the moment was right, you purchased your little piece of paradise. Perhaps you commuted back and forth for a few years until you were ready to retire, but finally the day came and you made the move, and may I just take a moment to say that I'm so glad you did because this is a better place to live because all of you are a part of it.

My story is a little different. It was a job opening for a new church start pastor that brought me to Northern Michigan. I was living in Rhode Island, serving a church full of really wonderful and loving people, when I first read the ad about the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ looking for pastors to plant a new church start in Traverse City. Like many of you, I had visited here on a family vacation when I was young and had fond memories of the place. Though I loved those folks in that church in Rhode Island, my heart belongs in the Midwest, as do my driving skills, and I desperately wanted that job because I was going to be great at that job. I was going to start that church and grow that church and it was going to have hundreds of members within a few short years and it would all be because I would be so good at planting a new church. And, I got that job.

And so, in November of 2003, we moved here. I was relieved to escape the hustle and bustle and crowdedness and Patriots fans of New England. I could look out my bedroom window in my house on Tower Road in Maple City and I could see "land lots of land under starry skies above." For the first time in seven years, I didn't feel fenced in. I had arrived.

I wonder if some of you had that feeling, too. Though you had never lived here before, when you did eventually settle here after all of those years of dreaming and planning, you finally felt like you had arrived home.

Our Bible story this morning is a story of arrival. In today's story God says to Abram, who we will later know as Abraham, God says to Abram, *Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

Amazingly, Abram agrees to go. It's amazing because Abram had grown up in a polytheistic culture in which there were many gods and goddesses the people worshipped. But God was looking for someone to show a different way. God was looking for the first monotheist, someone who worships the one Lord, God, Almighty, the great I Am, and that one God, our God, found that someone in Abram.

And so it was that Abram, along with his wife and nephew and "the people they acquired in Haran" (I believe that statement requires a sermon all of its own that will be preached at some other time when I am not here), they all left Ur, the only home they'd ever known, and headed towards Canaan, a place that later in scripture will be referred to as a land flowing with milk and honey. Throughout the 600 mile journey from Ur to Canaan, Abraham trusts on his way. And while it may be that you used to complain about traffic headed north on 75 on a Friday evening in the summer holding you up before you could arrive in your "Promised Land", in this case a land flowing with fresh water and sweet cherries, that journey pales in comparison to traveling through deserts and over mountains while dealing with the ongoing threats of marauding hordes and wild animals.

But, they made it and once they did God began fulfilling the promises made to Abram. The first promise was “I will make of you a great nation.” I imagine Abram and Sarai, or Abraham and Sarah as we shall call them from this point on though God doesn’t change their names in scripture for another five chapters, Abraham and Sarah must have been pretty skeptical of this promise because Sarah was barren and everyone knew it. It must have been hard for them to get their heads wrapped around the idea of becoming parents and being the only nonagenarians in the pick-up line at preschool. But, they continued to trust on their way and God followed through on the promise, because that’s what God does, and Abraham became the father, not just of Isaac, the patriarch of Judaism, but also Ismael, born to Sarah’s handmaiden Hagar, and Ismael, an ancestor of Mohammed, becomes a patriarch of Islam. And so it is that Abraham was the father of what are now three nations, or religions if you will, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These three faiths are commonly referred to as the Abrahamic religions and they share many things in common, especially and including, the belief in the One God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And so it is that God fulfilled the promise to make of Abraham a great nation in a big way.

The second promise God made to Abraham is linked to the first, “I will make your name great.” In the Old Testament context this likely doesn’t mean that God will make Abraham famous but rather that a dynasty of kings would come from him which, indeed, did happen during the era of the kings in the Old Testament. Abraham’s line continued and he is remembered for generations upon generations.

And then the third promise, “and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Indeed, this idea of blessing is mentioned in all three promises. After declaring that God would make a great nation of Abraham God said, “I will bless you . . .” After promising that Abraham’s name would be great God said, “You will be a blessing . . .” And finally God promises “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” And again, because it was something God promised, it is true. Abraham’s faithful dedication to the Lord has been a blessing to believers for eons. This kind of blessing could be thought of as “God giving power to something or somebody to do that which they are designed or intended to do.”¹

Indeed, Abraham wasn’t blessed, for Abraham’s sake. Abraham was blessed for the sake of the whole world. When he arrived in Canaan, it wasn’t so that he could get rich and fat off of all the milk and honey. Abraham arrived in Canaan so that he and Hagar and Sarah could begin the generations of people who would worship the one God, Lord Almighty. The great “I Am.” Abraham arrived where he did because he was blessed and so that he could become a blessing to others.

I believe the same is true of all of us. While our journeys to get here vary, I can’t help but think that we arrived here in Northern Michigan, or got to be born here in the first place, so that, in our being here, in our being blessed to live here, we would be a blessing to others. It reminds me of the words of Jesus in Luke “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” (Luke 12:48a)

And so while it might feel as if we’ve arrived, that arrival is only in a geographical sense. Indeed, no matter how long we’ve lived in the 231 area code, indeed no matter where any one lives and moves and has their being, the spiritual journey of being blessed so that we can be a blessing is a lifelong endeavor. There is no such thing as “arriving” in the sense that we are done.

This story of Abraham, told during the season of Lent, is an invitation for us to consider the ways in which our lives are, or are not, blessing others. Indeed, it can be tempting to think that because we’ve arrived here, because we’ve “done our time” or “paid our dues” or “earned our way” we’re good. But really, anything we’ve been

¹ <https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/what-is-blessing/>

able to do or earn or save is a blessing from God and any blessing from God is given for the purpose of being a blessing to others.

Let me illustrate the point with a painful story of failure from my own life. Remember that job I mentioned that brought me to Northern Michigan, that job I was going to be so great at . . . that job starting a new church? Well, friends, this church was started in 1896, I had nothing to do with its beginnings, and so obviously the other gig did not work out for me. As it turned out, I hated new church start ministry. Starting a new church is a lot of sales and marketing. For someone who really just wants to be a pastor, trying to FIND people to pastor made me miserable. If God had brought me, like God brought Abram, like God brought you, to a new place to be a blessing, it was clear that I wasn't a blessing to anybody in a job that took skills and abilities with which I am not blessed. I had arrived, all right. But I couldn't figure out why God had brought me all that way, and why I had left a church of people I loved back in Rhode Island, to live in misery, even if I was miserable under starry skies above.

But, just as God had a promise for Abraham, God had a promise for me. And, God has a promise for you. And that promise is that we will be blessed that others will be blessed through us. God did not leave me in my misery and despair, again, because God promises not to do that "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 40:10)

And that's exactly what God did when I let go of my will and pride that were all tied up in this idea of being a wickedly successful new church start pastor. As soon as I was willing to leave that behind and find out where God, instead of my ego, was leading me, as soon as I began to trust on my way, I began to accept the gifts with which I'd been blessed and do the best I could to use them to bless others in this place where I had arrived.

And I am in no way special when it comes to that. We are a priesthood of all believers. We are all the church. We are all blessed, as was Abraham, that others would be blessed through us. It's an amazing and awesome opportunity and responsibility. But, it's totally doable because when we trust on our way, God blesses us, not for our sake, not because we've earned it, but simply so that others might be blessed through us. Thanks be to God.