

“Called into Existence” (8Mar2020)  
Genesis12:1-4a, Romans4:1-5,13-17

There are no songs with this sermon. I guess that means there’s no song and dance routine.



I gave out all my stars. Neither are there visions or dream appearances. There’s no sandy beach up here or special visitors who might secretly be angels in disguise to sneak in with the Word.

There’s just the plain old Word.

“The LORD said to Abram, ‘Get up, get going, take yourself, go from your country and all you know. I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing.’ So Abram went, as the LORD told him.”

We’re not told how the Word of promise comes to Abram. The LORD said this to him, but it doesn’t say how God told him. In a voice from the clouds? Some quiet inner conscience that he just knew in his heart to be true?

We’ve been given a different perspective and different scale for this, somewhat unfortunately, since we live from an age where “the medium is the message.” Even though the story doesn’t have anything to say about *how* the LORD said these

things to Abram, for us it would make a difference. The razzle dazzle of a catchy song and dance might have lasting memorable impact. Something really phenomenal—like a thundering voice from the skies—would probably carry extra weight.

For good or ill, this fits with our readings from last week, as well. That talking serpent in the garden maybe feels to us extra eerie, or maybe we’d also listen if a serpent started speaking. Probably partly why we wonder so much how the devil appeared to tempt Jesus is that it makes a difference if he looked powerfully ominous or if he was tricky as some best friend to be trusted.

The unfortunate edge for us means the message is frequently lost due to the medium.

Even when we have big production feature films that promote Christianity, they pale next to the secular blockbusters. I went through a time in life where friends tried to convince me to listen to the current Christian music, ridiculously claiming it was as good as the stuff I was listening (as if anything could be as good as Bob Dylan). Christian pop wouldn’t hold a candle to the regular chart toppers. And, of course, corporate culture can bombard us with manipulative advertisements; I read this week that the average TV watcher “is hit with about 25,000 commercials per year” which probably means that the God of the Bible has a lower level of contact than Mike Bloomberg does with almost all of us.\*

Of course, there’s a dual disclaimer that, first, Christian companies are also in it more for the money than the message. Second and more importantly, with our incarnational God who so loves the world, with the Spirit who blows where she wills, such distinctions of categorical barriers distort. No medium—no movie, no music, book, person, or walk outside these doors can be declared apart from God.

Still, to make the promise explicit, it does raise the peculiar question that if Abram had a smartphone to distract him, would he have ever gotten the message from God? Not just Abram; if God is speaking to you, will God be able to get

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\* *The Market as God*, Harvey Cox, p199-200

through?

That's accentuated in its difficulty, I fully admit, because the clearest way that God is speaking to you is through me, the voice of your preacher, bearing God's Word for you and to you. If Christian movies and music and other facsimiles and knock-offs of our best media are mediocre at conveying the message, how in the world can you get it only listening to an occasional 10-minute dose from an obtusely unimpressive beard-o, reading from a manuscript without much glitz or glamor, blathering about something that may strike you of dubious importance anyway? It's remarkable that any message from God cuts through the noise to make it to our ears, almost unbelievable that any of us ends up believing anything from God at all.

To the original point, however it was spoken or declared or came to him, Abram heard this message from the LORD. "Go, away from your home. I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing to all the families of the earth."

Abram heard this word of promise, and he trusted it. We might question what would make him trust that the earth would be blessed through him. Almost as foremost on our minds is the question of how that promise would convince him to abandon all he knows, to become a wandering Aramean, never to have a homeland again, never get to settle, exiled and emigrating, never to see the fulfillment of this promise.

Maybe that's another historically accidental downside for us, that living post-Enlightenment, we are always on the hunt expecting proof. Some of us still like saying "facts matter," and we put confidence in the scientific method that makes data statistically provable. Abram didn't have proof to verify the promise. He had trust in its veracity. Even without the promise directly coming to fruition within his lifetime, he maintained his confidence, his trust in God. God keeps God's promises, and the promise grabbed Abram and claimed him to that degree.

It wasn't just those external circumstances of unfulfilled promise that caused the difficulty, that failed to offer results. It's also from Abram

himself. It says, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead." (Romans 4:20, 19).

As he goes on, God's blessing certainly isn't proven by Abram's life. He'll try to pass off his wife as his sister, not once but twice in order (as he sees it) to protect himself, but prostituting her along the way. He'll also be manipulated and, to an extent, prostituted *by* that wife. For a more typical difficult detail of life, in the end he'll have to bury her. Abram goes on to play favorites with his sons. That will leave him estranged from the poorly-treated less-favored elder son. But he'll also nearly murder the favorite younger son, who from then on will apparently never speak to him again. (With good reason!) So much for the direct part of this promise of him being a father. And for him being a blessing to the nations, he'll do a mediocre job at advocacy, sticking up for vulnerable people in a town to a point, but then giving up and leaving them to be wiped out.

This is all to say that the promise of the LORD is bigger than Abram. It's more than he can see or will get to see.

The even larger point is that this isn't an old Bible story about one guy. This is about you. Today, here and now, God is speaking this promise to you. It takes its own tone and key as it takes on flesh in your life, but it is the remarkable and nearly unbelievable word of the LORD that comes to you even through my voice, cutting through the distracting details or so-called evidence that would try disprove it. God says to you, "I will bless you so that you will be a blessing." God is calling you into new being, calling into existence from you something that does not yet exist. God is re-creating you.

In this political year, we could note that the theological term for this also happens to be "election." The Spirit blows where she wants, and she wants to choose you. You are God's preferred candidate for this campaign. In this Word right now, you are receiving God's vote. God chooses you. God elects you for this role.

With that, we don't need to imagine that God's voice is inevitably telling you to pack your bags and leave home, like Abram. But we could agree that you don't know exactly where this will take you, what it will mean for your life. That wording is in the Hebrew version of Genesis, too, not only telling Abram to "go" but telling him to "go to himself," that he'll find himself as he goes. You, too, will find yourself in new ways as you go with this blessing.

Like Abram, you may not see the end of all that this promise means. Like him, there's probably plenty to get in the way. You may not be the best with your family and may keep messing up. You may have many poor interactions. Your efforts for social justice and advocacy may remain lackluster. You may face suffering and death. No, you *will* face suffering and death.

And yet God's promise to you is reiterated, a persistent promise that is for you, yourself, for your own sake, and is also how God stretches on beyond you for the good of others, on to the whole world. You are blessed to be a blessing.

Even though you can't say all of what that means, in this simple small sermon you've received the Word of the LORD, elected with God's blessing and God's calling for your life, brought into new existence.

As a response, I invite you to pray with me the prayer in your bulletin:

*O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Hymn: *We've Come This Far By Faith* (ELW 633)