

Blessed to be a Blessing

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SCRIPTURE READING Genesis 12: 1-5

12 The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. **2** "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. **3** I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." **4** So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. **5** He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Sermon, July 16th, 2017, "Blessed to be a Blessing"

A few years ago, I finally made the pilgrimage to the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia that honors Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I had been to Atlanta a few times before this trip, but never had the time to make the pilgrimage. I say "pilgrimage", because I consider Ebenezer Baptist Church a holy place. As I walked around the sanctuary of the church, which is now a museum, they played sermons of Dr. King over the speaker system. It gave a sacred feel to the place, which was an ordinary, old looking church. As you walk around the King Center, you see artifacts, really relics from Dr. King's life. You see a Bible of his, his pulpit robe, handwritten notes, and you finish the pilgrimage by viewing his tomb and an eternal flame. It's a powerful place and if you have never been there, I would highly recommend it.

What was most powerful though was not all of the artifacts or hearing his sermons or even standing near the place where he once preached. While all of that was inspiring to see and experience, what was most powerful were the photos that lined the one room of the center. There was one picture in particular that struck my attention. It was a photo of the civil rights leader and legend, with his wife Coretta Scott King, and they were pushing their baby, Yolanda, in a stroller down a lovely southern street in the summer. Maybe it was the fact that I had a baby and a stroller too. It could have been the simplicity and normalcy of life that spoke to me. Either way, it was a reminder to me that this great, influential, spiritual leader, and I might say a hero of the faith, was a normal person. He was a husband, father, and friend to many.

For some reason, we like to lift people beyond this world. We place them on a heavenly or saintly pedestal thinking that they're out of our reach or beyond our abilities. I will never preach like Dr. King, I thought as I listened to him that day. I don't think I could have led a movement like he did with non-violence and love for the enemy. He is a saint, I am not. He is a hero, I am not. And yet, out of the waters of baptism, we are all called to go. Sometimes we move forward with the promise of God, sometimes we go without fully knowing what's to come, and yet our faith compels us, draws us, and calls us forward. We're all called to become heroes in our own way.

This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Just as Pastor Steve preached last week, we're called to carry our crosses. Jesus himself said it in Matthew, "If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." It's been a part of our faith tradition since the beginning. Go, move, and follow. That's what our faith calls us to do. That's what father Abraham did too.

Early in Genesis, after God created the world, saw the world overcome with violence and sin, we now turn to a couple, Abraham and Sarah. This reading is what's known as the Call of Abram or Abraham. He is called to leave his country, all he has known for unknown land and God makes three promises to him of descendants, land, and blessing. The Lord told him, "I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you." This blessing to Israel is for the sake of the whole world. God has chosen to interact with God's people. The blessing is not for Israel alone, but for the world. The prophets speak to this: the nations will go and say "Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Isaiah reminds us of this blessing. Israel is a light to the nations as Isaiah and Amos remind us. Later, God will work not through a nation or prophets, but through a person, God in flesh, Jesus the Christ, who will be a blessing for the world.

We are a part of this blessing for the world. This is our tradition of blessing. In Christ we are blessed so that we might share that blessing with others. As Jacqueline Lapsley, Professor of Old Testament from Princeton Theological Seminary, put it, "It is not something to be kept to ourselves; the good news of Jesus Christ is to be shared. This is the idea of the "missional church," which is, according to missional theologian Darrell Guder, "not just a program of the church ... It defines the church as God's sent people. Our challenge today is to move from *church with mission* to missional church" (*Missional Church*, 1998, 6). The church is not just about perpetuating itself, maintaining its own survival; it is about being a blessing to and for the world. God's call to Abram is a call to serve, to be a blessing to others, but it is also a declaration of love: God loves Abram, and God loves the world and so sends Abram on a journey that will bless the whole world."

We see this in the New Testament writings with the Apostle Paul. After his dramatic conversion experience, he too, was blessed to be a blessing. That is Paul's story. Isn't that Abraham's story? Isn't that Dr. King's story? Blessed to be a blessing. For many of us this can come rather naturally. It is our natural response to right the wrongs of the world, to be a blessing to others. We see an injustice and we are compelled to act. God recognizes who we are and calls us to act within our own gifts, interests, and even personalities. This week, in our heroes' sermon series, we are considering Abraham, Paul, and Rev. Dr. King. Why? How are they connected? As Pastor Steve mentioned last week, during our summer hero of faith series, we are looking at the personality assessment known as the Enneagram, nine personality types. It brings together perennial wisdom and modern psychology.

You will notice on the back of your worship bulletin the three types we are looking at this morning. It is known as the Gut or Belly Triad. It is Type 8: The Challenger; Type 9: The Peacemaker; and Type 1: The Perfectionist. You will notice in the nice Enneagram outline that I put together for you this week that we will be looking at people within each area.

I worked very hard on this. Not really. It's just copied out of Ian Cron's book *The Road Back To You*. I know Pastor Steve said the book was a good cure for insomnia, which might be somewhat true, but there is a lot of good information and details in the book. There are also links to free online tests that you can take that will provide you some guidance to where you might fall on the Enneagram.

As we look at the Gut or Belly Triad this week, we find people who are concerned with power and control, and they respond to this in different ways. Their center of gravity lies in the belly or gut and they are intuitive and spontaneous. Russ Hudson, who is an author and teacher of the Enneagram wrote, "The belly or gut center is where we're able to feel the immediacy of life and the realness of everything, right here and right now." Those who are in these types are concerned with making things right. They see a wrong in the world or life or an injustice and will respond in different ways.

Dr. King is a good Number 8, a challenger. Abraham is a Number 9, a peacemaker. And the Apostle Paul is a Number 1, the perfectionist. EIGHTs fight back, NINEs back off, and ONEs try to fix, reform, and control reality. When you think about the heroes we have looked into today, you can probably see how their personalities affected the way they interacted not only with the challenges and injustices of the world, but with the way they interacted with the world itself. Knowing our personality can help us understand how we act or react to a situation or person, but it can also help us see where we need to be challenged and pushed to follow God's call.

In the book that we're relying on for our sermon series by Ian Cron, he reminds us that there are those who are Healthy, Average, and Unhealthy for each type. Healthy Eights (*Challengers*) are great friends, exceptional leaders, and champions of those who cannot fight on their own behalf. There are also Average Eights who are more steamrollers than diplomats. And there are Unhealthy Eights who are suspicious, slow to trust, and seek revenge. It's the same for each type. There are Healthy Nines (*Peacemakers*) who are natural mediators, unselfish, flexible, and inclusive. There Average Nines who are stubborn with a touch of anger, and Unhealthy Nines who are overly independent and have trouble making decisions. Healthy Ones (*Perfectionists*) are committed to a life of service and integrity. Average Ones are judging and comparing. Unhealthy Ones fixate on small imperfections.

Wherever we are on the typology of the Enneagram, whether we're in this Gut Triad or one of the other areas, we still might know someone who is. There might be times that we become frustrated with the lack of response or too confrontational of a response from a brother or sister in Christ or maybe we become frustrated with our own response. For all of us, no matter where we are, we are called to follow the God who called Abraham, Paul, and Dr. King. That's sometimes scary and certainly challenging. It makes us vulnerable to our true self, our weaknesses and our strengths. To be a hero of faith is to embrace who we are, using our strengths and transforming our weaknesses, as we serve God and others. It's important, actually it's essential, that we know who we are. I might go back to this prayer time again from Saint Augustine, "Grant, Lord, that I may know myself that I may know thee." When challenges of faith and life come, it's important that we know our strengths and weaknesses. It's important that we know ourselves.

Martin Luther King Jr., age 26, after his first imprisonment, he and his family had just received a death threat and three days later his house was bombed. He later wrote in his book *Stride for Freedom*:

"And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl [his baby daughter] and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep... And I got to the point that I couldn't take it anymore. I was weak..."

And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I will never forget it... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage.'

... And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.' ... I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone."

Blessing did not come from what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King did; he became a blessing because he was open to the call that God had placed on his life and he knew who he was as a child of God. Blessing did not come from what Abraham did; he became a blessing to others because he was open to the on-going relationship God offered him. Blessing did not come from what Paul did; he became a blessing to others because of what God did in him. Blessing does not come from what we have done, but from who God has created us to be. In accepting the blessing that we are, we can become a blessing to the whole world.

Let us pray a prayer that was written by Dr. King:

O God, we thank you for the fact that you have inspired men and women in all nations and in all cultures. We call you different names, but we know that these are all names for one and the same God. Grant that we will follow you and become so committed to your way and your kingdom that we will be able to establish in our lives and in this world a brother and sisterhood, that we will be able to establish here a kingdom of understanding, where men and women will live together as brothers and sisters and respect the dignity and worth of every human being. In the name and spirit of Jesus. Amen.

Enneagram Personality Types

Gut (Belly) Triad (July 16)

Type 8: The Challenger. Commanding, intense and confrontational, they are motivated by a need to be strong and avoid feeling weak or vulnerable.

Type 9: The Peacemaker. Pleasant, laid back and accommodating, they are motivated by a need to keep the peace, merge with others, and avoid conflict.

Type 1: The Perfectionist. Ethical, dedicated and reliable, they are motivated by a desire

to live the right way, improve the world, and avoid fault or blame.

Heart Triad (July 23)

Type 2: The Helper

Type 3: The Performer

Type 4: The Romantic

Head Triad (July 30)

Type 5: The Investigator

Type 6: The Loyalist

Type 7: The Enthusiast

*Descriptions are from Ian Cron's book *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery*

Enneagram Tests

<http://www.exploreyourtype.com>

<http://www.9types.com/rheti/index.php>

<https://www.eclecticenergies.com/enneagram/test.php>