

We Make the Road by Walking
What Does It Mean to be Blessed?

Genesis 12:1-9
Children's Sabbath

I want to tell you a story. Two stories, actually.

The first story is a very old one. It's about Abraham, and it's one of the very first stories in the Bible. Here's one thing about Abraham that you need to know from the beginning: He was very rich. He had lots and lots of stuff—the 2500 B.C. equivalent of a big house in a nice location, with a mortgage that was almost paid off. He had a good wife, and lots of nice things. Many animals, which is one of the ways people who live close to the land still count wealth. He had servants. Furniture. An extensive wine collection. Flat screen television, with DVR capacity. Probably a large stereo system, because ipod's and Pandora had not yet been invented. Abraham was pretty happy. Not everything in his life was perfect; he and his wife Sarah hadn't been able to have children, and that was a big disappointment to them, but other than that, they had just about everything that anyone could want.

One day God came to Abraham and said, "I want you to leave this place and come with me. I can't tell you exactly where we're going, but it's going to be good. I'm asking you to do this because I want to bless you...even more than you've already been blessed."

And of course we don't know what Abraham's first thoughts were, or what Sarah said when Abraham suggested that she begin packing, because the Bible just gives us the short form of the story. I wonder if they said to each other words like, "You know, this life is already pretty good. At our age, why would we want to pick up and move?" But God said something to Abraham that changed everything. "I will bless you," God said, "...so that you will be a blessing...In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Wow. That's quite a promise.

I would guess that being a blessing to other people is something that sounds good to all of us. I would bet that even some of the most greedy and self-promoting people you know would give some of their stuff away if they could *know* that by doing so they would be a blessing to others. I think all of us would gladly give away more of what we hold if we *knew* that by doing so that we could have the impact of a Mother Teresa. But we hardly ever know what the impact of our work will be at the moment we have to make a decision about whether to follow that voice that might be God's, but might not. We worry: what if I offer my time and money to some noble cause *and it turns out it doesn't make any difference?*

Abraham and Sarah didn't know the answer to that question any more than we do. But they did what God invited them to do. They left their home and traveled, not exactly sure where they were going. They gave up the comforts they had gotten used to. They were counting on the promise of God to bless them and to make their lives a blessing—and they knew that somehow this blessing would involve children. This was hard for them to imagine, because they were already old. They'd been trying for years to have a child, and nothing had happened.

And then it did happen. Unexplainably, Sarah was pregnant. A son—Isaac—was born. Finally having a child of their own made Abraham and Sarah happy. But was *this* the blessing to all the families of the earth that God had talked about? Children are wonderful, but as every parent knows, every day doesn't necessarily feel like a blessing. There are moments when it's

hard to remember that your child is a blessing to *you*, much less to the whole world. Even in Abraham and Sarah's house, there were arguments and slammed doors, days when one or the other of them missed the things they had given up. I wonder if Abraham asked, "Is this it, God? Was there something else you wanted me to do, to be that 'blessing to all the families of the earth'? Is this the full blessing you meant for me?"

As the stories of the Bible go, even Isaac, this product-of-a-miracle child, didn't really do great things. It isn't until we get to the stories of Abraham's *great-grandchildren*—the twelve sons of Jacob whose own great-grandchildren followed Moses across the Red Sea—that we begin to see what God might have meant when he promised that Abraham would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

So what was it that God's promise meant in the meantime? What was it that Abraham passed down through his family until it started to look like a blessing to the whole world? Maybe just this: his willingness to trust God's promise that his life *would* be a blessing, even though he couldn't see the result of that promise. No doubt that story of picking up and leaving their home, their comfort, their security, so that they could bless others became part of the tradition of Abraham and Sarah's family. A story they told their son, a story he passed on to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. *This is who we are*, they said. *This is what we do. This family is a blessing to the world.*

Here's the other story. It's much more recent; its characters are alive right now, and most of them live not too far away. The story begins in 1987, when a woman named Oral Lee Brown was standing at a corner in East Oakland, which is a hard part of that city to live in. Oral Lee was standing on that corner waiting for the light to change so she could walk across. While she was waiting, a little girl—about 6 or 7 years old—tugged at her sleeve, and asked if she could have some money. "I won't give you money," Oral Lee said, "But come with me to the grocery store on the next corner, and I'll buy you something to eat." When they got there, the little girl picked out a package of bologna and a loaf of bread, thanked Oral Lee politely, and then she walked out of the store and down the street toward home.

Oral Lee didn't follow that little girl at that moment, but in the next days and weeks she felt driven to find her again. As she searched, she went to the local public school, and the principal let her look around. One day she went into a first grade classroom. She didn't see the girl she was looking for, but what she did see startled her: 23 children who looked like they had no chance of going much of anywhere, in school or in their lives. They looked tired and beaten down already. Of the 23, only four had fathers who lived at home. Even in first grade they were less than eager learners. Just by looking at them and knowing where they lived, Oral Lee knew there wasn't much hope for their lives.

Something about that class and the memory of that little girl tugging on her sleeve for a loaf of bread touched Ms. Oral Lee Brown. Soon after she visited the school that day, she walked into the school principal's office and announced that for any of the 23 children in that first grade class who finished high school, she would find the funds to pay for their college education. And she did it. It became her life's work to get those 23 children to succeed in school. She became a second mother to them—sometimes more like a first mother. For years, she stayed with them. She coached and disciplined and cajoled them into finishing high school. The first of them graduated from college in 2003, and today, 19 of them have graduated from college. And Oral Lee Brown paid or found the money for every one of them to do that. She

began when those children were in first grade to put away \$10,000 a year out of her \$45,000 annual salary, and she kept saving until she had enough.

Oral Lee Brown didn't know how it would turn out when she started to put her hard-earned money away for somebody else's children. She didn't know if those kids would rise to her challenge; there were no guarantees. She didn't know that one of 'her children' would die of a gunshot wound when she was just 19. Oral Lee couldn't see into a crystal ball any more than we can. She couldn't foresee the future for those kids *or* for herself. She just trusted the voice that sounded like God's: a promise that her vision for those kids would be a blessing. And because she was willing to make a commitment out of that trust, Oral Lee Brown has made out of her life an incredibly powerful blessing—not only for herself, but for 23 children who had the chance to go to college because she gave them that chance. For their community; for their children and grandchildren whose family tradition will now include the story of someone who chose to bless them. *This is who we are*, that story will say. *This is what we will do*. *We too can be a blessing to the world*.

Among all the loved and cared-for children here, among us, there is a child who is not colorful or happy; she is what the poet Ann Weems calls *The Greenless Child*. You will hear, at the end of the poem, several places that ask you to speak out loud your commitments on this Children's Sabbath.

I watched her go uncelebrated into the second grade,
A greenless child,
Gray among the orange and yellow,
Attached too much to corners and to other people's sunshine.
She colors the rainbow brown
And leaves balloons unopened in their packages.
Oh, who will touch this greenless child?
Who will plant alleluias in her heart and send her dancing into all the colors of God?
Or will she be left like an unwrapped package on the kitchen table—
Too dull for anyone to take the trouble?
Does God think *we're* her keeper?

And so I ask you on this day when we honor children and their place in this world:
Who will touch the greenless children, and work to see that every child enters school ready to learn, from a home where they are safe and nurtured?

We will, with the grace of God.

Who will believe, and act on the belief, that all children can succeed in school and in life?

We will, with the grace of God.

Who will work to support children and parents, teachers and principals to make the best educational decisions possible?

We will, with the grace of God.

Who will support our schools and let teachers know that their work is valued?

We will, with the grace of God.

Who will support families when they are in crisis, so that the needs of their children can be met?

We will, with the grace of God.

Who will work to involve our whole community to see that children—not just *our* children, but *all* children--get what they need to learn, to thrive, to grow into the whole persons they were created to be.

We will, with the grace of God.

We are called—all of us—to covenant with God and with one another in this most important work, this work of blessing all the families of the earth. Let God's promise to us and our promise run deep in our tradition, so that we too say: *This is who we are. This is what we do. We are a blessing to the world.*