

....and then give it away

Genesis 12:1-8

Acts 3: 1-26

Right from the first days of creation, God wanted to live in relationship with us. Adam and Eve were created by God, for God. They communicated with God, there in the garden. And then sin entered the world, through disobedience and lies. And the relationship was broken. Adam and Eve were sent away from the garden and they no longer enjoyed the same level of companionship, of intimacy with God. And though God tried again and again to heal the broken relationship with humanity, first with Cain and Abel, and then with Noah and his community, and then with the growing city of Shinar, sin continued to dominate the story and the relationship between God and the jewel of his creation was even further broken. And then came Abram, several generations and centuries after the scattering of the people of Shinar across the face of the earth. Seemingly out of nowhere, God called to Abram, in the middle of an ordinary day of his ordinary life. And this is what God said to Abram: you can find it in Genesis 12. God said to Abram: “Leave your country, your people and your Father’s household and go 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.” Prior to this moment in time, we know almost nothing about Abram, just three lines in the story. We know his father was Terah. He had two brothers; Nahor and Haran. He was married to Sarai, who was barren. They had no children. They were from Ur but at some point, Terah moved and they moved along with him. They started out for Canaan but once they reached Haran, they decided to put down roots there. And then, one day out of nowhere, this message from God. Genesis 12 marks a new beginning in God’s relationship with humanity. Abram and Sarai are given new names, Abraham and Sarah as a sign of the new relationship. Since the loss of innocence in the garden, God’s relationship with humanity has never been fully healed. In fact, it got progressively worse, to the point where God virtually wiped out the entire creation with the flood, save for one family and a boatload of animals. After the flood, and the swarming of the city of Shinar threatening to reach for the heavens in the construction of the tower of Babel, God knew He would have to try something else. Maintaining the status quo was not working. An intervention was needed. And so, God began a conversation with a man named Abraham, one day, seemingly out of the blue. And right there, on the spot, God made a covenant with Abraham. Now, normally, when we think of the word covenant we think of a kind of two way relationship: like a contract or a business partnership or a marriage. In a marriage ceremony, the husband says I will love her and honour her and be faithful to her and then the wife says I will love him and honour him and be faithful to him and they seal the covenant with a kiss. But the covenant that God made with Abraham is different. Listen carefully to it again: Leave your country, your people and your Father’s household and go 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. This covenant with Abraham: I will, I will, I will – it is unilateral. God is the active agent. He asks nothing of Abraham. God has learned his lesson. He cannot depend on humans to stay faithful in their relationship with God. All Abraham has to do is leave Haran and move to a new place. God will do everything else. God promises to: make him a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great, to make him a blessing, to bless those Abraham blesses and curse those Abraham curses, and to bless all people on earth through Abraham. The covenant does not depend on Abraham. God will guarantee the covenant. And we know this to be true. When Abraham and Sarah foresee Sarah's barrenness, her inability to bear children as an acute obstacle to the fulfillment of God's covenant to make him the father of many nations with descendants as numerous as the grains of sand, they take matters into their own hands, and produce a son for Abraham through Hagar, the household servant. But God had other plans. The covenant, God's covenant was God's to guarantee, not Abraham or Sarah or Hagar. And so when they were both well past childbearing years, when neither of them would be able to produce an heir, when there was no longer any explanation but God, God gave Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac. God kept his covenant. Abraham was blessed, and he became the father of a great nation and his descendants were numerous. But God's covenant did not end there.

Not long after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Peter and John are at the temple in Jerusalem. And outside the temple courts is a man who was born with a physical disability who is begging the passersby for money. And so he ask Peter and John if they can spare some change. We read this story earlier in the fall so you might remember that Peter responds in a way many of us might: sorry man, I don't have any change on me. But unlike us, Peter continues. And he says to the man: sorry man, I don't have any change but here's what I do have In the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk. And the man walks! And everyone who sees it is astonished, standing there wide eyes, jaws dropped. But it is what Peter says next that is truly astonishing. "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk!" Of all the people in the world, the men of Israel, this audience who witnessed the healing at the temple on that day, the men of Israel, the descendants of Abraham with whom God made his generous covenant, should have known. This man was healed because God promised Abraham that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him. It wasn't by something Peter and John did, it wasn't some organic concoction they whipped up or some smoke and mirrors show. God used Peter and John as a conduit for his blessing to flow through and heal this man. They opened themselves to God and He made it happen.

I started this year by cleaning up my craft space. It had kind of taken a beating during the Christmas season as we make our own Christmas cards and wrap our gifts in brown paper which we embellish with handmade tags and bows and ribbons. And in the rush to get things ready on time, I didn't really worry about putting things back where they belonged. But you can't really avoid cleaning up forever and so on January 1<sup>st</sup>. I went back into my craft space to face reality. I am a hoarder. (I was going to say, I could be a hoarder but the truth is,

I am one already.) It sounds more palatable to me when I say that I am a keeper. That is true. I like to keep things: memorabilia like the movie stub from the first date Kirk and I ever went on. But it's more than just items with a nostalgic pull. I hate to throw something out when I can imagine a use for it, when it still has a purpose. Maybe someday, I think to myself. So, when I say I am a hoarder, I don't want you to envision a front door that you can barely open because there are piles everywhere. There's not an intervention in my near future, at least not the kind showcased on A&E. Still, when I was tidying up my craft space, it was clear that something more was necessary than just stacking the already existing piles a little higher. I found a little bin and began to fill it with items I no longer needed. And then I moved to a bag because I needed something bigger than the small bin I started with. And when the bag was full, I found an empty box and began to fill that too. And rather than just put that bin and bag and box into my deeper level of storage, I passed them along to others who I thought might be able to use them. My tendency to hoard craft supplies reminded me of how we, as disciples of Jesus, might similarly handle the blessings God gives us.

“Count your blessings – name them one by one, count your many blessings, see what God has done. It was a great gospel song back in the day with a catchy little tune but it didn't go nearly far enough. Because that's where we stopped. We counted our blessings. We counted to see if we had as many as the next guy. And if we didn't, we wondered why not and we complained. We didn't bother to look at those whose blessings may have been fewer than ours. Because now we were too busy counting our burdens instead of our blessings. So many burdens compared to those with more than their fair share of blessings. We have blessings but we take them for granted. And somewhere along the line, we stopped counting them and started letting them pile up. We accumulated them, save them, hoarded them. In other places of scripture God's covenant with Abraham is restated in this way, that Abraham was blessed to be a blessing. We like the blessed part. We crave the blessed part. We want to be blessed. But we have for the most part completely forgotten about the other clause: blessed to be a blessing, blessed so that all people on earth might be blessed through us. God's covenant does not depend on us: He will keep the covenant with or without our participation. But we are invited. That's amazing! We are invited to participate in the covenant with God. Its not that we have to but that we get to be conduits of His blessing, a means for God's blessing to flow into the lives of those around us, of those on the other side of the world. God envisions that a natural byproduct of our experience of His goodness in our lives, a natural byproduct of the experience of the blessings of God in our own lives is that we will want to share that, to communicate that to others, that we would want for everyone to experience and to see the blessings of God in their lives. So, you can understand what Peter meant after this amazing miracle happened and everyone who saw it was so astonished. And he says “Why are you so surprised? Don't you know? This is exactly what it is supposed to look like. When we remember that we are a covenant people, that we belong to God and God to us, then God works in us and through us to reveal himself to others, he blesses us and in so doing he blesses others. All we are is conduits. We are the way God spreads His blessing. You are the way God spreads His blessing. You can count your blessings and if you've been at KesPres for awhile, many of you will know that I highly

recommend counting them everyday as a way of actually noticing God at work in your life. But here's the danger: you can count them and then you can be tempted to hoard them and keep them all to yourself. God will find someone else to use. But you have been invited by God himself to be the means, the vehicle of his blessing to others: friends, family, strangers. And that miracle: the man disabled from birth walking and dancing – that's what it is supposed to look like: the disabled walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, the anxious are calmed, the addict is free, the depressed feel joy, the lonely are befriended, the hungry are filled, the broken are restored, those left for dead are raised to life, and we get a front row seat – we get to see God at work, and in so doing, we are blessed again.

So, yes count your blessings and name them one by one, and then and give them away. And God will keep His covenant through you. You are blessed to be a blessing.