

I

Will Willimon once served as the bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. He recounts a time when he paid an early weekday morning visit to a church in downtown Birmingham that serves a hot breakfast each day to whosoever will come.

Bishop Willimon arrived at the church and greeted the guests and volunteers in the dining room, and then he made his way into the kitchen. He was somewhat startled when he noticed a prominent Birmingham lawyer washing plates and cups. This man was something of a prominent figure, well connected politically and known as a leading citizen of the city. Yet here he was in the predawn hours in the church kitchen, an apron around his waist, the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled up to the elbows, leaning over a tub of greasy dishwater.

Bishop Willimon sidled up to him and tried to strike up a conversation. "Good morning," he said, in his most chipper voice. However, the lawyer just grunted, barely looking up from his dishpan.

The bishop was somewhat taken aback, so he tried again. "Cold out there today, isn't it." This time, the bishop got no response whatsoever.

So he decided to go the direct route. "Tell me, have you always enjoyed working with the homeless?"

At this point, the lawyer looked up from his dishes and gave the bishop a sharp look and let out an exasperated sigh. "Bishop, have you *seen* those people out there? Most of them are so messed up that not even their own families want them around."

The bishop blinked, not sure what to say. "Then why are you here?" asked the bishop.

Without missing a beat, the lawyer retorted, "Bishop, I'm here because Jesus put me here. Why are *you* here?"¹

II

Why are you here, indeed. Nearly every institution, whether it's a business or a church or a school, has a mission or vision statement of some sort. The mission statement, if it's done well, helps clarify the reason for being. It helps draw the organization back to its purpose if and when its members start to get in the weeds. The mission statement helps everyone to be able to answer the question, "Why are you here?"

But does God have a mission statement? Does God have an overarching purpose that God returns to

¹ Bishop Willimon told this story in his sermon for the Baccalaureate Service at Columbia Theological Seminary in May 2008.

when things get in the weeds? The answer, I think, is yes, and God's mission statement is at the heart of our reading this morning.

III

As we mentioned last week, for the rest of the calendar year, we're going to be reading stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, which we also call the Old Testament. We won't be going chapter by chapter or even book by book, but we're going to trace the broad narrative arc of God's relationship with God's people as told by our Hebrew ancestors in faith.

We started last week with a story about a flood and an ark and a rainbow. These stories from the early chapters of Genesis, the stories of creation, of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and Noah and the flood and the Tower of Babel, the pre-history narratives, if you will, weren't written and passed down to us to teach us earth science or genealogy or zoology, but rather theology. These are stories that teach us about who God is, and who we are, and the nature of the relationship that God has established between God's own self and God's creation.

These pre-history narratives are epic and cosmic in nature. But when we come to today's passage, the scope shifts dramatically, all the way down to this one particular couple, a man named Abram and his wife Sarai.

We don't learn much at all about

Abram and Sarai's backstory before today's passage. We know that they and some of their extended family are living in a place called Haran, and we know that though Abram and Sarai have been married for many years, they have as of yet been unable to conceive and bear a child.

But that's the extend of what the text says about them before we come to today's passage. So listen now for a Word from God from Genesis 12:1-9.

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to

him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

Did you hear it? Did you hear God's mission statement? Listen again. The Lord said to Abram, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

All the families in the earth shall be blessed.

That's what God is up to in the world. That's God's mission statement. That's the business that God is in. God is in the business of blessing all the families of the earth.

That's God's "why." But what about the how? How will God go about this? We've already learned thus far in the biblical story that God can create whole worlds just by speaking them into being. We've already learned that God can create life just by breathing into the dust. So it would be perfectly within God's power to simply say, "Let all the families of the earth be blessed," and *poof*, it would be so.

But that's not how God chooses to bring about God's vision of blessing. God chooses Abram and Sarai to be

God's partners in mission. I have no idea why. The text doesn't tell us that they were any more righteous or faithful than any other couple. The text doesn't tell us that they were handsome or pretty or strong or rich or young. In fact, the text has already told us that there is a major challenge that God will have to overcome if God wants to make their descendants into a great nation, because they have as of yet been unable to conceive and bear a child, and they're both in their mid-70s.

I submit that the rest of the book of Genesis, indeed, the rest of the biblical story, is about how God will work out God's intention of blessing all the families of the earth, sometimes because of Abram and Sarai's descendants, and sometimes in spite of them.

For Abram and Sarai's part, the text also doesn't tell us about whether or not they argued with God about any of this. It doesn't say what that conversation was like between Abram and Sarai when he broke the news to her. Can you imagine? Hey, Sarai, I've got some news to share. God called to me and told me that we are going to become the patriarch and matriarch of a great family, and that God intends to bless all the families of the earth in and through our descendants.

Oh, that's wonderful news, Abram!

Um, yeah, but there's just one thing. We have to move.

Move? But this is our home. All our family is here. Move where?

Uh, the Lord didn't give me a forwarding address. He just said he'll show it to us when we get there.

The text doesn't say any of that, of course. The text just tells us that God called, and at the age of 75, Abram and Sarai pulled up stakes and moved.

And you know what they say about change. The only person who likes change is a wet baby.

And yet that's something else we learn about the nature of God and the nature of our relationship with God in this story. If God's mission of making a great nation that is the vehicle of God's blessing for all the families of the earth is going to even get off the ground, change is required.

And if you're a student at all of the bible, that shouldn't be surprising. Everywhere you look in Scripture, there is a call to change.

To Abram and Sarai, God said, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

To Moses and Miriam, God said, lead my people out of Egypt and through the waters of the sea.

To Peter and James and John, Jesus said, "Come follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

To a woman who was nearly stoned to death by an angry mob, Jesus said, "Does no one condemn you? Neither do I condemn you. Now go, and sin no more."

To participate in what God is doing in the world, to be an instrument of God's mission of blessing all the families of the earth, always involves change.

IV

My friend, I can't begin to describe for you how much God loves you. There's nowhere that God wouldn't go for you, and there's nothing that God wouldn't give for you. God loves you not because of anything you've done or not done, not because of anything you've said or not said. God loves you not because you're especially young or handsome or pretty or wealthy. God loves you because you belong to God. God looked at you and said, "That one is mine."

God wants more than anything to bless all the families of the earth. Not just the ones that look like you or pray like you or love like you or vote like you or speak like you – all of them. And God wants to work in and through your life in order to bring about that intended purpose. God did not create you to be a spectator in the stands in God's work in the world, but to be a key player on the field.

But in order for that to happen, some change is involved. And so I

wonder, what needs to change in your life in order that God's work can unfold in and through you? Maybe it's not as drastic as picking up stakes and moving, although it could be. But maybe something needs to change in your daily routine. Maybe something needs to change in your approach to a relationship that's important to you. Maybe something needs to change in the ways in which you are handling God's gifts of money and material resources.

It's true that the only person who likes change is a wet baby. But it's also true that there can be no growth without change. There can be no new life without change. So remember, my friend, the invitation to follow Jesus, the invitation to be a part of God's mission of blessing in and for the world, always involves a change.

V

Some of you know that our siblings in faith who live out their discipleship in Jesus on other branches of the church family tree like to tease us Presbyterians by calling us the Frozen Chosen. I once saw a satire newspaper piece that said that the local Presbyterian church had installed motion-sensing light bulbs in the sanctuary to save money, but the congregation was suddenly plunged into darkness one Sunday morning because no one in the room had moved for 45 minutes.

It's true that as a general rule, we Presbyterians value doing the work of

the church decently and in order.

But here at First Presbyterian Church, we are not afraid of change. We are beginning our third century of mission and ministry in this community in Jesus' name, and we know that the next century will be very different from the two that have preceded it. We know that the *how* of our ministry must and will change.

But our core mission will not. We have been called by God to create community where people seek the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, rejoice in worship, and go forth sharing the love of Christ with Athens and the world. That's what we're about – that's what God has called us to do and be – that's why we're here.

Go, says God, and I will cause you to grow and thrive. I will bring fruitfulness where before there has been barrenness. I will bring joy where before there has been emptiness. Come join me and participate in what I am up to in the world. All those who bless you, I will bless them, and if any pour soul should be curse you, I've got your back. Come follow me, and together we will bring about the blessing of *all* the families of the earth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.