

## Beginning at the Beginning

Genesis 12:1-4

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The first words my wife Amy ever said to me were, “Hi, are you Richard?”

I was an incoming college freshman at the University of Missouri, and I was moving into the dorm. Amy was a junior, working for the Residential Life department greeting the newly arriving students. Because of a mixup, I had changed dorm rooms at the last minute, so according to the paperwork on Amy’s clipboard, I was supposed to be Richard Clark. So I used to tell people that Dick Clark introduced me to my wife. But until the day that I die, I will always remember the first words that Amy ever said to me.

First words are important words, because they so often set the tone for everything that will follow.

“Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all people were created equal.”

“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.”

“Long, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away, or, if you prefer, space: the final frontier.”

First words are often very important words.

So I’ve been thinking for some time about the first words I might say to you this morning, on this, the first of many Sundays we’ll spend together for many years to come. And as I thought about where to begin, a song from *The Sound of Music* began to creep into my mind. “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.”

But if you are an astute observer of the bible, you'll note that the text I selected for our focus this morning is Genesis 12, rather than Genesis 1. Many of you, I suspect, are fans of classical music. And you know that in a piece of classical music, oftentimes a composer will begin a piece with a prelude, that is several measures of music that introduce the piece.

But it's the overture where the composer states his or her thesis. It's the overture that the composer will return to over and over again as the piece unfolds. Sometimes there will be different instrumentation or tempo or dynamics, but the overture is the common thread that holds the whole piece together.

And so one way to read Genesis is to read chapters one through eleven as the prelude. The accounts of creation, the difficulties with Cain and Abel, the troubling story about the flood, and the tower of Babel, those can be read as measures of introduction. But I think the overture of the piece, not just of Genesis, but of the entire biblical story, is stated right here.

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."

That's the overture. That's the thesis of the piece. That's the thread that we'll keep coming back to over and over and over again. Sometimes with different voices or settings or dynamics, but that's the thread that runs through the whole bible, from Genesis to Revelation and back again.

Did you hear it? God's intention, God's purpose, God's mission, God's deepest yearning and longing, is for blessing. Blessing not just for Abram and Sarai. Not just for their children and descendants. Did you hear it? Listen again. "In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

That's what God is up to in the world. That's God's mission. That's God's deepest yearning for God's creation - that all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

But here's the crazy thing. We already know that God can make entire solar systems and galaxies and oceans and mountains just by saying the word. So if God could have just said, "All families of the earth, be blessed!" and poof! it would be so, and the biblical story would be much shorter.

But that's not how God chooses to operate in the world. And that's another piece of this overture, another thread that we'll keep coming back to over and over again. God chooses a particular people to be the agents, the delivery vehicles, of God's blessing.

And that brings us to Abram and Sarai. When we meet them in this story, we know very little about them, other than that they were in their mid 70s and it had long ceased to be possible for them to conceive a child.

But there's nothing in the text to suggest that they were somehow more faithful or smarter or craftier or stronger or more beautiful than anyone else. I have no idea why God chose them. God could have just as easily chosen Alex and Samantha, or Andrew and Stephanie, or Arturo and Sophia. Maybe God went to scroll through the contacts list, and there was Abram's name, alphabetically, right there at the top.

For reasons only God knows, God chose Abram and Sarai. And God notes that they, too, will be blessed. God will turn this childless couple into a great nation. God will make their name great. But Abram and Sarai are not the primary beneficiaries of God's intention. They are the agents of God's blessing, the vehicles of God's blessing, but the intent is not just for them – it's for the blessing of all the families of the earth.

And so that's the theme that we'll see over and over again. God has this intention, this deep, burning desire, that every family on the face of the earth will be blessed, and God will work in and through this one particular family to be the primary vehicles of that blessing – not because they're any great shakes or somehow braver or stronger than anyone else, but simply because God chose it to be so.

Years ago there was a movie called *City Slickers*, starring Billy Crystal, who played a man having a midlife crisis named Mitch, and Jack Palance, who played a

rough and tumble wise old cowboy named Curly. During a crucial scene in the movie, Curly turns to Mitch and says, “You know what the meaning of life is?” To which Mitch replies expectantly, “No, what?” And Curly holds up a gnarled finger and says, “This.” And Mitch says incredulously, “Your finger?” Curly says, “No, it’s just one thing.” “What is it?” asks Mitch. “That’s what you’ve got to figure out,” says Curly.

The meaning of life is this one thing. You were put on this earth to be an instrument of God’s blessing. Everything that you have, everything that you are, everything that you will be, is a gift from a God who is more loving, more gracious, more generous, than you or I could ever possibly imagine.

You, my sister, you my brother, have been chosen by God to be a blessing. Not because of who you are, but because of who God is. Not because of what you’ve said or done or not said or done, but because of what God has done for you in Jesus Christ.

My dear friend, don’t ever, ever, ever let someone tell you that life is meaningless. Don’t ever, ever, ever let someone tell you that you don’t matter or that the world would be a better place without you. Your one thing is this: you were fearfully and wonderfully made by an awesome God, and you were made to be a blessing.

So as you go into your workplace tomorrow morning, as you go to class tomorrow, as you go to lunch this afternoon, as you go to whatever it is that you’re going to next, go knowing this: you have been chosen by the Most High God. God has claimed you and marked you and blessed you, and those who bless you, God will bless, and if some poor soul is foolish enough to curse you, don’t worry about it, God will take care of it. But you’ve got a mission to fulfill. You’ve got a divine purpose to your life. You are here to be the instrument, the delivery vehicle, of God’s deepest, longest yearning: the blessing of all the families of the earth.

But there’s something you should know. In order for any of that to happen – in order for God’s divine intention of blessing to be worked in and through you and out to all the families of the earth – you’ve got to change. In order for Abram and Sarai to become great patriarchs and matriarchs, they had to move. They had to go from their country and their kindred and their father’s house to a land that God would show them.

And that's another overture, another theme that we'll keep returning to over and over again in this story. Every time Jesus meets someone, he invites them to change.

Drop your nets and come follow me, he says to some fishermen by the lake.

Does no one condemn you? Then neither do I condemn you, he says to a woman about to be stoned to death. Then he says, "Go, and sin no more."

To the women who meet him early one Sunday morning outside an empty tomb, he says, "Go and tell my brothers I am going ahead of you to Galilee. Tell them to leave Jerusalem and I'll meet up with them there."

The call to discipleship in Jesus Christ is a call to change. And the only person who likes change is a wet baby.

But here's some good news. We're in this thing together. Because most of the you's in the bible are actually y'all's. Most of the you's are second person plural. It's not just about you. It's also about all of us, together, in this thing called the church. And so can we just check something in with each other right now?

I have heard so many wonderful things about this incredible place called First Presbyterian Church. And I know you have heard many wonderful things about me and my family. And all of that is fine and good. But if we're not careful, we're setting up ourselves for some disappointment.

Because the truth is that you and I aren't any different than our ancestors Abram and Sarai. There's nothing altogether remarkable or special about us, except for the fact that for reasons only God knows, God has called us together into this place called First Presbyterian Church.

And oh my goodness has God blessed this incredible church! I took a walk through the building this week, and I came to the narthex, and I was all alone, and it was very quiet and still. And I looked at the names inscribed on the marble, and yes, Carol, I hope it's many, many years, if ever, before my name shows up out there, but I couldn't help but feel the legacy of faith that has been left to us. But we are not the ultimate destination of those blessings. That legacy of faith is not for us. It's for the blessing of all the families of the earth. All. That means the families here in Athens. And the families in Watkinsville and Winterville. And the families over in South Carolina and up in Tennessee.

God's has called us to be instruments of God's blessing for all the families of the earth. In and through us, God wants to bless all the families in Mexico and Honduras. In and through us, God wants to bless all the families of South Korea and North Korea, too. In and through us, God wants to bless all the families of Saudia Arabia and Iran and Syria. In and through us, God intends to bless every family in every land on this earth.

That's the incredible news of this story, sisters and brothers. Not just of Genesis, but of the whole bible. God's intention is for blessing and God has called you and I to play a role in this incredible story.

And so here's a spoiler alert. Abram and Sarai will indeed eventually become the patriarch and matriarch of a great family. And many generations later, in a backwater village called Bethlehem, a baby boy will be born to a man named Joseph and a woman named Mary, and they will name him Jesus.

And Christ Jesus,  
 who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,  
 he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
 and gave him the name  
 that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.<sup>1</sup>

May we enter that story this day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2:5b-11