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Genesis 12:1-3

1 Peter 2:9-12

Matthew 5:13-16

By Whom Shall the Families of the Earth be Blessed?

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It has been said that the Bible falls neatly into three sections:

The first section is Genesis, chapters 1&2, which contain the two creation stories: the seven days of creation and the story of Adam and Eve. In these stories, God proclaims that creation is good, even *very good*; and the place where our race first lived was a *paradise*.

The second section is Genesis, chapters 3-11, which tells how sin entered into God's good creation, and grew and grew. First, Adam and Eve were disobedient and ate of the forbidden fruit. Then the first born of our race, Cain, was guilty of fratricide by killing his brother Able. Violence and vengeance grew almost unchecked till the time of Noah and the great flood, and even after the flood, sin soon entered in to despoil God's good creation.

The third section of the Bible consists of everything from Genesis 12 through the end of the book of Revelation. This last section, which contains almost the whole Bible, is often called "Salvation History", and it tells of God's efforts to redeem our race and to restore God's good creation. All of this has led some scholars to describe the Biblical story as "The story of life in Paradise, then Paradise Lost, and finally Paradise Regained in the New Heaven and New Earth of the Book of Revelations."

God's plan of salvation begins to unfold at the very beginning of Chapter 12 of Genesis, with the call of Abraham. Terah, the father of Abraham, and his whole family had been part of that great migration of persons up the Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys from the Persian Gulf to what is now parts of Syria and Turkey. They had come from the city of Ur in the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran, in an area called Paddan-aram. It was here at Haran, that God spoke to Abraham and said that if you will go where I send you, and serve me faithfully, then here is my promise to you: 1.) I will bless you and make your name great. 2.) I will give you many descendants and make of them a great nation. 3.) By you, all of the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Note that the goal was not to glorify or reward Abraham. It was not to elevate his descendants into some kind of super race or nation to rule the world. No, the purpose of the whole enterprise was to provide a blessing to all the families of the earth, and in so doing, fulfill God's purpose of redemption and salvation of God's creation.

The plan was that God would reveal himself to these "chosen people", these descendants of Abraham, in a special way. He would give them his LAW, to show them how to live. And he would send Prophets to speak to them and keep them on the right track. This chosen nation is to

be unlike any other nation on earth. It will be a nation of priests, and live faithfully before God. In this nation there will be *justice and righteousness*. There will be *compassion* for the poor; *help* for widows and orphans and *hospitality* to strangers

This nation will not trust in its own might, but in the providential care of God. Psalm 20 declares: "Some boast of chariots and some boast of horses (i.e. military might), but we boast in the name of the Lord our God. They shall collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright."

In the community of the chosen people, there will be peace and harmony and joy and contentment---Ah Yes! This nation will be so special; in it life will be so wonderful, that it will be an *example* to all of the other nations of the earth. When others see what life *can* be like, they will want to live that way themselves, and they will all try to emulate them, and live under the care of God. In this way the chosen people, Israel, will be a light to the Gentiles, and the *promise to Abraham* will be fulfilled that "by you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

It is interesting to note that the blessing would not come by making all people into Jews. The goal was not to convert and absorb all other peoples. The goal was to be an example, to show the way, to provide a living testimony to the possibilities of abundant life under the providential care of God.

Although God was faithful, and gave the LAW and sent his Prophets, still the expectations were almost too much to hope for. The Hebrew Scriptures themselves reveal that the chosen people often fell short of fulfilling their destiny. Yet their efforts were not all in vane. As they sought to know God, and to live before God in response to his Laws, their achievements were remarkable in many ways.

They made the first great effort to constrain the growth of violence by restricting vengeance to simply "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" rather than the seven or even seventy fold vengeance that had been the custom.

They were the first great religion that embraced monotheism, which is the understanding that there is *One God* of all nations and all peoples, rather than endless tribal gods.

And they produced a code of moral and ethical conduct that was widely admired throughout the ancient world. In the Holiness Code of Leviticus, over a millennium before Jesus, there is a commandment that "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." And in Exodus there is the admonition "When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. And when you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, you must help set it free." Surely these are the most ancient insights into the commandments of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that are so important to us as Christians.

The Romans recognized the unique, sacred nature of the life of the Jews and gave them special consideration such as not having to serve in the Roman army. The Greeks, with their interest in antiquity and philosophy, were so intrigued by the Jews that they gathered up 70 Hebrew scholars and took them to Alexandria where they were assigned the task of translating the

Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. The result of their work was called the "Septuagint" and is the only Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures extant today. The Greeks were trying to make the ancient wisdom and religious insight of the Jews more widely accessible to the Greek speaking world.

To this very day the sacred stories of these "chosen people" shape our understanding of the nature of God. That God is a God of compassion who cares about the poor, the oppressed and powerless and every form of human suffering. That God's passion is for liberation and reconciliation. And God's love knows no bounds and will be with us no matter where we are or how far we wander. When the "Holy Remnant" of Israel was in bondage in far away Babylon God was there and proclaimed through the Prophet Isaiah, "Do not fear for I am with you. I know you. I have called you by name, and you are mine. You are precious in my sight and I love you." Then God led them through the wilderness back to their home in Jerusalem.

Their Psalms, poetry and hymns have comforted us and inspired us for 3,000 years. And the thundering of their prophets for justice and righteousness has resounded throughout the centuries. But in spite of all of this, perhaps their greatest achievement was to pave the way for the next, and as far as we know, the final part of God's plan of salvation. They gave to us and to the whole world, *the Messiah, God's own son*, whom we know as *Jesus of Nazareth*, or simply by the credal statement, Jesus Christ.

In the fullness of time, his church was called into being, and the followers of Jesus claimed that they were the true descendants of Abraham--- not by blood, but by faith. In so doing, the church claimed for itself the *promise* that God had made to Abraham and took upon itself the awesome responsibility to be the "New Israel".

Peter said and still says to the church; "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. That you might declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

So the church has taken upon itself the responsibility to be God's people, to be the agent and vehicle of God's work of redemption and salvation in the world. It is now *our* responsibility to so live that *we* will be the example---that *we* will show the way, and *we* will demonstrate the possibilities of life in this world. The church universal has been called into being for the purpose of fulfilling the promise to Abraham that "all of the families of the earth shall be blessed."

And make no mistake, you and I, as part of that great universal church, are called to so live together in this congregation that by our example "all of the families of the wider communities will be blessed."

But before we get too excited about claiming for ourselves the title of "God's Chosen People", let us remember that it is not a title of privilege and honor. Rather it is a responsibility and a heavy burden to bear. It is not easy! It is not just thankless, but sometimes it is downright dangerous to be God's people, and proclaim God's Word to the world.

It might give us pause to consider the history of the Jews, and the amount of persecution and suffering that they have had to endure. The great twentieth century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr has maintained that, "The world does not hate the Jews because they are the Christ killers, as it claims. Rather, it has hated them because they are the Christ bearers." Then he adds that this fallen world does not take kindly to anyone or anything that would have it be better than it wants to be. Hence, the contempt for reformers and "do-gooders" and of course, the cross of Christ.

I am reminded of our own Congregational forefathers and mothers who stood in the vanguard of the Abolitionist Movement in the decades prior to the Civil War. They were surely doing God's will in standing against the brutal and unjust institution of slavery. But because of their efforts, they were a despised and persecuted minority. They did not dare venture into the southern states for fear of imprisonment or even death. And even in the great northern cities of the New York and Boston they were constantly threatened with violence. They were attacked by mobs. Their buildings were burned to the ground. Some lost their lives in the struggle. And to a more or lesser degree, it has always been so.

To be God's people is not to seek to be popular and to please everyone. It is not to be the great defender of the status quo. But it also is not to always promote change for its own sake, and embrace the latest fad. The challenge is first to seek to discern the will of God in every issue, which is not such an easy task. Soren Kierkegaard said that life can only be understood looking backward, but unfortunately it must be lived going forward. But still we cannot let doubts and uncertainties reduce us to inaction. Once we have reached an understanding of what justice and righteousness demands of us, then we must have the courage to follow where it leads. We can only show the way to a better place by being a pilgrim people who are ready and willing to go where God takes us, and thus show the families of the earth yet a better way.

I am afraid that in our time there is a temptation to take the church lightly--- to take it for granted---to underestimate and even trivialize its power and influence---both in our own lives and in the life of the community. But the church has been bought with a great price---the blood of Jesus and the martyrdom of the saints, and it has been entrusted with a magnificent role in God's great plan of salvation.

The Prophets called Israel to be a "light unto the Gentiles". Jesus called his followers to be:

- 1.) The light of the world,
- 2.) The salt of the earth, and
- 3.) The leaven that leavens the whole loaf.

So if we are prepared to follow the call of Jesus, and take upon ourselves the responsibility of being God's chosen people, we can never be sure just where it will take us. If we are truly prophetic and speak out for justice and righteousness, it may well lead to the enmity and hostility of the world. Remember that from the very beginning, they killed the prophets, and persecuted anyone who dared to speak truth to power.

But, at the same time, if we truly build a community where we love each other---trust each other---share each other's burdens, and help each other along the way. If we are truly open and accepting of all persons: the rich, the poor, the educated and those who are not so, regardless of the color of their skin, the clothes they wear, their sexual orientation or even their political affiliation. If we make sure that there is a place for the old as well as the young, the halt and the lame as well as the strong and healthy (people like me as well as people like you).

It may well be that life will be so rich and rewarding that all of the community will say WOW! We want to be a part of that. We want to live like that too. And if the church is not the light of the world, where will the light come from? And if the church is not the salt that flavors and the leaven that leavens the whole loaf, then what is? And if we cannot, or will not, be the example, the living proof of the possibilities of life on this earth, then where will that example come from?

I think we know that there are lots of others who will try to show the way; to lure us and entice us onto paths that we would best not travel. There are all kinds of life styles, all kinds of values and beliefs---that beckon to us, that compete for our loyalty, that offer us pleasure, that pander to our lust and greed. And I think we all know that these ways which are not God's ways, will more often than not, prove to be a curse, rather than a blessing.

We know that the church is, and always will be, an imperfect institution, because it is made up of imperfect people like you and me. Still, in the final chapter of God's plan of salvation, the church has been given a great responsibility. This means that you and I must do the best that we can to strengthen and empower her. We must love her and pray for her, and never, never do anything to weaken her or undermine her mission and her message.

It is a fair question, and an important question to ask, "If not the church, then, by whom shall the families of the earth be blessed?"

Let us pray.