

**Blessings in a Foreign Land**  
*For Berkeley Chinese Community Church, UCC*  
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**Genesis 12:1-4a**

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.

**Romans 4:1-5, 13-17**

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

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About 4,000 years ago a family left Ur of the Chaldeans....an area we now know as southeastern Iraq.

They settled in Haran, Turkey, on the Syrian border. There in Haran the father Terah died, and the son Abram, later renamed Abraham, received a divine command to continue his journey: "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you".

He believed that he had heard the very voice of God, and at the age of seventy-five "Abram left, as the Lord had told him" (Genesis 12:4), and journeyed toward the land of Canaan.

Abraham left Haran in faith, not knowing where he was going, or even why...except that God had commanded him. In so doing he acted against the natural inner longings of human nature and the outer pressures of cultural conformity to hold onto what's familiar, and to travel the tried and true, the easy road.



Now if we think that Abraham left a Godforsaken place...or lived in the boonies.....think again...the city of Ur is named. Even if Abraham and Sarah lived in a tent made of stitched together goatskin like the one I sat in at Bible Town (I kid you not).

This was a very interesting museum outside Jerusalem – it had the tent that I mentioned, a cave that shepherds and their sheep might have slept in, an olive press, the upright part of the typical cross upon which criminals were crucified.

Anyway, even if Abraham and his family lived in such a tent, it might have been close to this fabulous city called Ur.

We know that even in 2000 BC Ur was a place with an advanced culture. You see, back in the twenties and thirties Sir Charles Leonard Woolley excavated Ur and came up with some of the greatest treasures of archeology.

In Ur's royal cemetery they found 16 tombs, each one filled with golden headdresses and gold and silver harps. Each tomb contained up to 74 bodies of servants who were buried alive with the king. Woolley's excavations also revealed that the houses in Ur were 2 stories high and were whitewashed to be pleasing to the eye.

The larger homes had up to 20 rooms, with well-equipped kitchens, good plumbing and sanitation. Their schools taught mathematics, astronomy and medicine. This was the world that Abraham lived in!

He probably had a very comfortable life in the most advanced culture of that time. This was the world he was asked to leave and go to some unknown destination....a location that would be revealed to him by God somewhere along the way.

He was in his golden years - he had lived a lifetime - most stories agree that he was about 75...that's how old I am! And he was going to leave that old life behind and be led by God to some strange place....that takes guts...that takes energy...that takes faith!

God's command to leave his country included a promised blessing: 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.

What make me sit up and take notice is that there is a promise of blessings...

- Go - leave all that you know and you will be blessed....
- not only you, but all those who bless you
- and in you, all the families of the earth - everyone down the line.....

Sounds to me like God knows and understands how difficult it would be to head out lock stock and barrel towards the unknown. But God also knew that by interacting with the unknown, Abraham would be setting things in motion for this hope of blessing all the families of the earth.

This story of Abraham going to unfamiliar lands and places reminded me of some amazing journeys that I have heard by participating in ecclesiastical councils in our Bay Association of this Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. So – the Bay Association includes churches as far north as Vallejo, as far east as Livermore, as far south as Union City and as far west as the San Francisco Bay.

Each church in the Bay Association sends representatives to this body called the ecclesiastical council which has the authority and responsibility to ordain candidates into Christian ministry on behalf of the UCC.

Incidentally, on Saturday March 25, I will be attending an Ecclesiastical Council for two ordinands...Sonny Graves who is serves as staff for our conference and Elijah xxx who is serving as youth minister at Skyline UCC. So, if anyone is interested in joining me....let me know.

During the Ecclesiastical Council, candidates share their faith journey, their sense of call and their understanding of ordained ministry.

One of the most powerful experiences was Debbie Lee's Ecclesiastical Council...Debbie is the daughter of Zion and Julia Lee – some of you may know her or parents – she was also a seminary classmate of mine.

For Debbie, it was a journey to Brazil where she lived and worked for several years that she saw God - she talked about it and wrote about that experience in such a way that we all knew she was being blessed in a foreign land.

Listen to her words in her ordination paper...

"Living and working in this community of 5,000 families living on the hillside along a freeway, I saw God struggling, displaced, weathered and worn.

"I also saw God faithful, loving, beautiful and prevailing.

I found God reflected and manifest in little and big ways everyday by the people of the Vila dos Milagres (the village of miracles.)

"I witnessed daily miracles and daily resurrections.

"I was schooled on hope, love and a living faith from street children and street theologians...

" In my two short years in Brazil, I saw this spiritual power and presence in the face of enormous sin."

I heard Debbie's words as an articulation of blessings in a foreign land, where she and her Brazilian families were blessing each other in the relationships they had formed.

And I wonder how many meet God and find blessings in a foreign land. I think about the many immigrants who go to unknown places – like my own mother who came here to the United States without knowing what kind of life she would have so that she can be with her husband, my father. She had no idea that SHE would find a new community of other Chinese immigrants who would teach her and guide her in all things...from how to do all those domestic chores for herself to how to cope with the world around her without knowing English.

At home in China, she was the eldest daughter-in-law in her husband's large household and never really worked at performing tasks and chores – she was kind of like the supervisor of the other daughters-in-law and servants.

In Stockton California – she was fortunate that she found many immigrants from Toisan who took her under her wing to help her navigate her way – she found work at the local cannery, she found support in raising her American born child – me – in this strange country who had an American name she couldn't even pronounce – Syeah – loon. Blessings of support in a foreign land – is that not God?

There are other dramatic journeys – I remember another candidate sharing **her** journey in a foreign land – the foreign land inside herself – a journey inward. Her experience of being rejected by her denomination because of her Lesbian lifestyle was a painful one for her to live through and to share. One semester away from graduation - she came out of the closet as a Lesbian person and was told she would not be granted her degree...Masters of divinity.

Her journey was going to those places of grief and anger, of shame, of disbelief and eventually toward a reclaiming of not only her own spiritual life, but responding to God's call to journey with others on their spiritual journeys. What a blessing! In her journey into that unknown part of herself, she heard and experienced God – she knew that spiritual direction was her calling, but so is ordained ministry and so is teaching! She now has a PhD in spirituality.

It was such a joy to see her glow as she spoke about her work in spiritual direction and to hear her excitement about venturing into the uncharted waters of the next phase of her journey, ordained ministry. It was obvious to me then and now that this woman is a living example of being blessed in a metaphorical, and very real foreign land.

The blessing for me in all this is that I know both of these women. I've sat in classes with both of them. I have seen how each has grown into God's call. Each one has been transformed from one whose very being announced "I don't know what I'm doing here" to one whose presence proclaims "this is what God is calling me to do." Indeed a blessing!

So, what does all this have to do with us here at BCC, this Lenten Season 2017? You might have noticed that things are happening here! We're in the midst of our New Beginnings Conversations – where we are sharing and listening to one another in small groups – in configurations where language barriers are bridged with the grace and skills of our bilingual bridges. And we're entering our own foreign land of communication with one another about how we experience God and church, what we believe in our hearts, who we believe we are as Berkeley Chinese Community Church and what we believe God is calling us to be and do going forward.

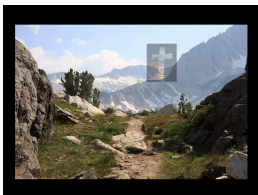
And we don't know yet – we're still figuring it out – we're still asking God for directions to that unknown place!

Hearing the stories of individuals who are here now and who have been a part of this family in years past are important pieces to knowing our roots and our branches. And God provides – A few weeks ago we were right here celebrating the life of Arthur Wong, husband of Lily Wong, father of Gail, Stephanie and Scott Wong who grew up at BCCC.

There were probably close to about 100 in attendance – among them many who were friends of the Wong children – now probably in their 40's and 50's. It was a reunion of sorts – what a blessing for us to see the pure joy in their faces to reconnect and share their memories. These were the kids in middle school and high school when I was a newbie at BCCC. These were the kids that were the pied pipers for the little kids in the church including my own daughters.

And I wonder if their stories would be part of the blessings for all of us on our journey to our unknown. And I wonder who else and what other stories will come our way to enrich our conversations and connections with each other and with God?

So for us, for BCCC, we seem to be in the middle of something that is happening...perhaps we, too, are called to foreign lands of sorts. With our worshiping communities and former communities coming together in various ways and on various occasions, intersecting, overlapping, sharing...the shape, the make - up, the extensions of BCCC - morphing right before our eyes. And this journey toward some yet unknown, yet indescribable way of being is what God is calling us to....not unlike Abraham, not unlike Debbie, not unlike our Lesbian ordinand.



What does that mean? What does that mean for each of us as a BCCC member or friend? What does that mean for us as BCCC, God's church? How can we respond? What does each of us individually, what do all of us collectively have to bring on this journey?

Save the date, Sunday March 26, when we will have conversation #4...where we can share, where we can listen to one another, where we can ask questions, and struggle with answers, where we can explore and consider the beloved community we can build together...and until then, let us prayerfully consider all our questions – and responses – in love and faith...mindful of God's promised blessings -"And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you!".....May it be so. Amen.