

The Clue to the Mystery
Genesis 12:1-9
October 14, 2018

Very often, in the mystery stories I read, there is a clue embedded somewhere in the story that leads to the eventual resolution of the crime. It may be something said by one of the characters; it may be an apparently innocent detail somewhere in the telling of the story that doesn't arouse our suspicion at the time. But as the plot is developed to its culmination the clues finally make some sense.

When we reflect on the biblical plot developed from Genesis to Malachi many of us find it a mystery that is not easy to unlock. It was such a hidden mystery that most of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus missed it. Jesus as Messiah wasn't what was expected, for this is not how it was supposed to end. But clearly Jesus and his followers were able to clarify and unlock the mystery, as Paul says:

...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col 1:26,27)

The death and resurrection of Jesus was where the plot was moving all along. People like us who were once excluded from the promises of God have had our names added to the family of saints. Paul says: *remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Eph.2: 12)*

What had been the possession of Abraham's family for generations was now available to Gentiles. As is often the case in mystery stories, as we have seen, namely a clue to the mystery is buried somewhere in the story itself, can it be that this is the case here? That's what I want to explore today!

Let me take you on a brief tour of the origins of that story as we have it in the opening chapters of Genesis. Brian McLaren has a unique way of understanding these stories. He sees them moving from **Creation to Crisis to Calling**. In this Old Testament story McLaren sees God seeking ways to deal with the problem of human evil. In the stories of creation, of Cain and Abel, of the Tower of Babel and of Noah, God seems to vary the ways by which God deals with the problem. At first he threatens Adam and Eve with death if they eat the fruit. But they don't actually die; they are simply cast out of the garden. God allows families to flourish, but that doesn't work either as Cain kills his brother Abel. But then Cain is told he's going to have to become a nomad and not to worry for God will never leave him. God protects him by putting a mark on Cain so he will not be killed. The story moves forward to Noah and the ark. This time a flood is to resolve the issue. But surprise, surprise, God finds one good man, Noah, and the human family is saved. But even this one good man, does evil and so fails to fulfill the covenant responsibility. But God does say that he is never going to do that again! Then we come to the Tower of Babel. Once again God takes a different approach. Because the human family is seeking to consolidate power through this one gigantic towered city God decides that this is ominous for the future. So God scatters them by confusing their language.

It's sort of like the mother who says to her two kids, each of you get to your own rooms and maybe then you will settle down and stop fighting. Sometimes that works, but in this case separating people from Babel doesn't solve the problem of evil. It continues.

Then we come to the story of Abraham and now we learn that God is going to deal with evil in a completely different way. In chapter 12 of Genesis we read: *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.

Abraham was originally from Ur, a great city in the Sumerian empire. It was a sophisticated centre of culture, arts and business. Indeed it is

reckoned to be one of the great early civilizations. Abraham's father, Terah who is an old man decides to leave Ur and move his family to Haran. They travel around the great Fertile Crescent. He takes his son Abram, his wife Sarai, and his grandson Lot. He left behind his son Nahor. The other son, Haran had died. They ended up in Haren in what is now modern day Turkey where Terah died.

There they settled and it was while in Haren that God spoke to Abraham and told him to leave. He has to leave his business and his adopted home. He has already had to leave his true home in Ur where his ethnic roots were and where he had called home with his whole family system. Now he has to leave his second home and have a completely fresh start. Abraham obeyed. He didn't know where he was going, but he went anyway.

All he had were these words we quoted above. Now this is Hebrew poetry that features parallelism. McLaren thinks that this poetry takes us back to the oral tradition of Israel and hence these are very important words. Perhaps, he says, among the most important in the Bible. The Hebrew parallelism goes like this:

I will make you a great nation/ and I will make your name great

And I will bless you/ so that you will be a blessing.

Lesslie Newbigin wrote that those who interpret this promise to say that God calls us **for** a blessing are guilty of the greatest heresy in the history of monotheism. But if we believe that God calls us **to be** a blessing we are getting the truly radical nature of God's call to Abraham.

This is God's new way of dealing with evil, one that God will employ for the rest of the journey toward Jesus. Through this tribe of Abraham, God means to bless the world. Remember the last phrase of he promise. It goes: *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

It's only natural for us to interpret this calling to Abraham to mean blessing for us alone. In our somewhat self-centered approach to life we want to assume that blessing is for us, for our kind of people, for

our tribe. It was equally natural for Israel to leave out the parallel lines of the poem that asked them to be a blessing to the world.

Here then, in this ancient calling story, we have our clue to the mystery that will unfold with Christ's coming. In these words, perhaps the most important words in the bible before Christ's coming, we have the clue to God's intention. God seeks to address the problem of evil that has been unleashed on the world through Adam and his descendents, by calling one family through whom God will bless all people. But it will take God's final act in the person of Jesus the Christ to finally bring this promise into true relief. Christ's life, death and resurrection will be the final fulfilling of this promise so that all peoples can be saved. Evil is dealt with on the cross and resurrection secures his triumph. Now God's kingdom has come to earth, and his will done on earth as in heaven. All this is possible now with Christ's coming.

So through us, his people, children of Abraham by faith, God intends to bless all people. This is our calling. What is God calling West Flamboro to be and do in this new beginning? What is God calling you personally to be and do this year? What has God been preparing you for and have your spiritual ears been open to hearing God's call to you?

There is no mystery on this point. This is simply God's way of addressing the evil and violence that we see in our world, in our city, in our country. The list is long and daunting. But surely God is calling us as a church to do something that will be a blessing to others! Surely God has placed us here, and you in particular here in this community, to share God's love with others. They so desperately need this blessing.

Amen