

GENESIS 12:1-2

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> And 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.

Matthew 3: 13-17

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; <sup>17</sup> and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

"What am I going to do, Agatha," said Shirley to her best friend. "The doctor said it's just a couple of spots, and it might be this or it could be that. And we'll just have to wait until the next couple tests can be done. But it will be six weeks before they both can be scheduled. What about all the stuff about early detection? What am I going to do in the meanwhile."

Agatha was not sure what to tell Shirley. So she gave her the best advice that she could think of on the spur of the moment. "Why don't you go talk to the pastor? Maybe she would have some words of wisdom."

Meanwhile, in the center of the city, in a larger and nicer office than the little house than where Shirley was entertaining Agatha over a mid-morning coffee, Ron was sitting across the conference room table from William. "What can I do, William?" asked Ron for the third time in the past twenty minutes. "That deal that I have worked so hard to put together might fall apart in the last few minutes because the Senator we expected to push it through the legislature surprised everyone by losing. My whole career is based on this project happening. My wife won't know what to do. I might even lose my job here at the firm. I've got children that will be in college soon. Can't you think of anything else that I can do?" William wasn't sure of what to say to his friend and business colleague of the past six years. In desperation, he said, "Maybe you could talk to my pastor. She seems to have a pretty good head

on her shoulder. And she's not always been a preacher, you know. She does know how the real world operates.”

Meanwhile, in her office on the east end of the city, Pastor Elizabeth couldn't get over how her schedule for the whole week had filled up. What was going on in the world out there? She already had eight appointments that she had booked since 10:00 this Monday morning:

- One person had a spouse who was dying.
- Another person had received what might be a death sentence from her doctor.
- Two people were living in the land of medical limbo – the real estate of the Valley of We Don't Know
- One person was losing their job.
- One person's child was arrested
- One person's family was disintegrating over the division of the father's estate.
- And the last man could not stop crying long enough to explain what was the problem; only that he really needed to see her; and it was “really bad” was all she understood him to say between sobs.

“What is going on, here?” Elizabeth wondered. “I could use a little help here, God. OK?” The next appointment was in 15 minutes.

So Elizabeth decided to spend that 15 minutes in prayer to prepare for the next person – who was either losing their job or had been given bad news by their doctor; Elizabeth was getting them confused. And it was only Monday.

However, the prayer time was well spent. Elizabeth spent thirty minutes listening to what the person said (it was the person losing their job) and interrupted only to clarify some of the details. Then, based on her

previous prayer and on the prayer she continued while she was listening, she asked a simple question: “Do you want a blessing? Do you want that problem handled?” “Of course I do. What should I do?” And Pastor Elizabeth Salisbury told the parishioner what he was to do, and then to report back on that Friday at 11:00 a.m.

And so it went for the next seven appointments. Although she did not mean to have a cookie cutter approach to these very different crises in the people’s lives, she ended up asking the same question of each person, and giving each one of them the same homework assignment to do and come back a few days later, after having done it. She didn’t mean for it to be the same, but that’s what God told her to do each time. And she had spent a whole adult lifetime trying to do what God told her to do, particularly when she had asked for direction.

Each person the Rev’d Elizabeth Salisbury told that she would make up a special holy potion to handle their particular crisis. But she would need the person to bring her one ingredient to mix up that potion: she asked for three teaspoons of salt – one each from the home of a person who was not then, nor had not in the past twelve months, had a crisis in their or their family’s life, at least as bad as the crisis they were facing now. So, in asking, the person would have to describe their own crisis in asking if that home had experienced one as bad or worse.

One by one, the follow-up appointments were kept. One by one, each appointment revealed the disappointing news that they had not been able to collect the three teaspoons of salt. Two people had managed to collect one teaspoon each. None of them, Elizabeth was pleased to discover, tried to fake it and bring in just three teaspoons of salt from their own salt dispenser at home.

“So what that our blessing,” most of them would ask, “to discover that we are not alone; to discover how our problems seemed to always find greater ones by comparison?”

“I don’t know,” she responded honestly. “You have to sort that out for yourself. But, you kept your part of the bargain. And, now, I will do my part, and give you that blessing that I promised. I can’t mix up the holy potion, without those three teaspoons of salt. But I will give you a blessing. Here it is: **You are a beloved child of God. You are precious in God’s sight, and beautiful as well.** There is nothing that you can ever do to increase or decrease that value in God’s eyes. And nothing that the world ever does to you will ever take it away from you. Come back in two weeks and tell me if that blessing is worth anything, in your situation.”

Well the two weeks have not yet gone by, so I can’t report on what answers Pastor Elizabeth got back for those folks who came to her – by the way, not all of them were members of that church. Some were outside referrals.

But I will tell you this. At Christmas, we heard that God put on human flesh, so that humans can put on divinity. In His baptism, we read in scripture that Jesus, of whom we know of no sin that needed to be washed away, was baptized by someone who thought he was unworthy to do so. But Jesus told John that it was necessary, in order to “fulfill all righteousness.”

In His Baptism, Jesus received the BLESSING of a NAME from God. And it is the same BLESSING of a NAME that the Rev’d Elizabeth Salisbury pronounced upon each person feeling a desperate need to be blessed.

Righteousness – after Jesus’ Baptism – was no longer an issue.

The God-become-human, so that humans-could-claim-their divinity were also given a new name.

Righteousness is no longer an issue.

Acceptance is no longer a concern.

God did not send Jesus to change God's mind about human righteousness. Rather, God sent Jesus to change our minds about God.

No matter what is going on in your life / my life.

No longer do any of us have to worry about being "made righteous" by some formula – blood, saying the right creed, doing the right things in the church, etc.

WE ARE LOVED BY GOD. Period. Our Baptism marks us with that acceptance. It is our blessing.

These sermon series are about what we will BE.

What will you choose – to BE BLESSED or to be IN NEED OF SOMETHING ELSE IN ORDER TO BE BLESSED.

Through Jesus' birth and baptism, you don't need to do anything ... just accept it.

What will you BE?

As you come forward to remember your baptism, I pray that you will remember what has already been done, and claim your blessing.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.