

**"Bless You!"**  
**(Genesis 12:1-4a)**  
**March 13, 2022**

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you." Was it a blessing, or was it not? If we assume Abram was living a sedentary life, the word of God would be a command, a challenge to Abram to cut himself off from homeland, ancestry, and family. However, if we consider Abram a wandering shepherd, God's word was an offer of salvation to Abram, saving him from threats either from nature or the groups of people surrounding him. Does God's word sound like "Bless you"? Was it a blessing, or was it not? What do you think? Our presupposition of Abram's situation will significantly influence how we see it, how we see ours.

Recently, due to the Russian invasion, more than two million Ukrainians have fled their country within two weeks. Ukraine's current population is about 44 million, which means more would be doing the same. Europeans have stepped up, welcoming them with open arms, and it's a good thing to see. However, did they do the same to the refugees from Syria, Latin America, Asia, Africa? Unfortunately, they didn't. Bulgarian Prime Minister said: "These are Europeans, intelligent, educated people." "This is not the usual refugee wave of people with an unclear past. None of the European countries is worried about them." This European response is unfortunately consistent with the racism, Afrophobia, and Islamophobia that have historically defined European Union's (UN's) immigration system.

"All people on earth will be blessed through you." Believing that God's blessing is to be made available to everyone, disregard one's gender, age,

nationality, and racial background, as communities of faith, how should we respond to the discrepancy between the promise and its fulfillment?

It's discomfoting to know that some of the EU's member countries and candidate countries have used batons, stun grenades, and tear gas on asylum-seekers, including children and pregnant women. Some even used attack dogs and forced the migrants to strip naked in freezing temperatures. So, has the situation become better now? No. We still heard in 2021, several hundred Afghan, Syrian, Iraqi, and other asylum-seekers along the Poland-Belarus border were without shelter, food, or water in freezing temperatures. In addition, they faced regular violence by the guards at the border, resulting in at least a dozen deaths, including children.

Were there reasons to justify the treatments to different groups of people? I am sure there were, and there are. The Berlin Wall fell, but the nations kept building new ones. Do you think Canada has a clean record in North America?

When the United Empire Loyalists fled to the Maritimes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British had promised freedom and land to the Black Loyalists. Burchtown in Nova Scotia was home to the largest concentration of free black settlers in British North America. But the promise was very different from its fulfillment. The land was granted based on skin color. Resettlement was hard for White Loyalists, but it was worse for the Blacks. Poverty, epidemics, and suffering were widespread among them. Harsh winters, sickness, and lack of healthy food killed many.

In 1885, the Canadian government imposed a head tax on every Chinese person seeking to enter Canada, and the amount of the tax kept increasing. In 1923, the federal government suddenly passed the Chinese Exclusion Act and barred Chinese people from entering Canada completely, not even sponsoring

family members. Many Chinese men had no alternatives but remained single until the repeal of that Act in 1947.

St. Louis carried 930 Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany to Cuba in June 1939. Cuba accepted 22, and then the voyage of St. Louis continued to the U.S., Canada, and then back to Europe. Canada was the only western country that completely closed its doors to Jewish people fleeing Nazi persecution. And there're more of these.

"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse." This sentence didn't justify discrimination, as God's protection is available to all who play the role assigned to Abram. For those recognized as nobody, God would make them great as a powerful nation, and make them famous as movie stars, just as those who are already secure and renowned, God would make them even more stable and popular. It didn't mean to support any forms of oppression and domination.

What does it look like when religion falls into the wrong hands or when human beings use God's name to justify what they do? That makes the prayer "Hallowed be your name" in vain and validates criticism against religion, like Karl Marx's. He stated, "(Religion) is the opium of the people" because it diverts people's attention away from the actual conflicts in their daily lives to pleasant illusions, which gave them strength to carry on. Marx observed that religion shifted the people's focus away from the temporal to the eternal, enhanced them to neglect the facts of oppression and exploitation, or even support them. In other words, blessing has become a commodity that one can procure or sell, privy to selected groups instead of all.

God's word to Abram was, "... you will be a blessing ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." However, the ways how people understand it are many. "Bless you!" could be a polite expression of our care for others, a social response to someone saying, "Achoo." But it could also function as a magic word to shield us from the bad things coming with the sneeze. It depends on how we understand the origin of this expression. As a faith-seeker, however, what we intend to say might better be "May God bless you!" that channels the received love from God to others.

When we read the word of God to Abram again, we found that the blessed circle of people kept increasing, from you (Abram) to those who bless you, and then to all peoples on earth. Do you notice if there's any change in the blessing? The blessing remains the same, available to all parties, disregarding their gender, age, nationality, and racial background.

It's storytime again.

I don't have a different story today, but the one on the "Pages for Lent" sent out on Wednesday this week. The 10-year-old boy sat in a hospital chair beside his dying mother and said, "I'm good." We know it's impossible to be "good" when people keep whispering, "There was something in the water," or "the air doesn't smell right," in the area where the boy and his mother are living.

We live in a fractured world that requires restoration. If the only thing we do is shift the focus of all to eternity, neglect the facts of oppression and exploitation, then Marx was right – religion is the opium of the people. But, of

course, one could make a further step to justify it. Then religion would even be the opium prescribed to the people.

As people of faith, we believe that we are blessed. From mismatched socks to our very lives, they all come from God. God blesses us because God loves us, and not just us, but to everyone, including every living being on the planet and beyond, even the planet itself. So "Bless you!" or "May God bless you!" say it as you mean it. Amen.