

“Risky Blessing” GPPC 3-8-20
Genesis 12:1-4, John 3:1-17

Life is full of challenges. And there are times in our lives when people do everything they can to warn us about the challenges we will face for a particular endeavor. Have you experienced that in your life?

It used to be routine that when you went to college, at some point the president of the college would look out at the incoming freshman class and say something such as, “Look at your fellow student to your right and look at your fellow student to your left. By the time these four years of study are over, only one of you will remain, the other two of you will have dropped out.” You might want to study.

If you’ve ever trained for your first full-length marathon of 26.2 miles, you may have heard the warning that the real marathon, the true test of a runner’s heart begins not when the gun goes off and everybody is cheering, high-fiving, and dancing to Tina Turner blaring over the loudspeakers at the start line but after twenty solid miles of running. That’s when many of us are exhausted, bleeding, blistered, aching, and feeling like quitting. After twenty miles the *real* marathon begins.

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Back in the mid-1980s when I was puzzling about whether God might be calling me into the pastoral ministry, I sat down with one of my pastors in Brooklyn, New York. He was very encouraging to me, but also honest. He said seminary takes three full years, including internships and chaplaincy work in the summers. In addition to the other classes, you will have to pass Hebrew and New Testament Greek. In addition to graduating from seminary, in order to be ordained, you must pass five ordination exams—Bible content, theology, polity, worship and sacraments, and biblical exegesis. If you cannot pass the exams, then you will have spent three years earning a degree that is not particularly useful for other lines of work.

By the way, I had taken French 1 in the ninth grade when I was in junior high school. Then I went to high school and, oddly enough, the teacher, Mrs. Touchberry was her name, expected Jacques (the French name she gave me) actually to know some French. So after making an F in my first nine weeks, I repeated French 1 and then took French 2 the following year. As you can imagine, I was really excited (terrified) about going to seminary and learning the biblical languages. At the time,

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Union Presbyterian Seminary only taught the languages as intensive courses—six weeks in the summer for New Testament Greek and four weeks in January for Hebrew. I just about lost my mind. But, of course, I had been warned. The journey ahead was going to be hard, and I might fail, and the walk would require persistence and faith.

Notice how God speaks to Abram. “Go from your country *and* your kindred *and* your father’s house to the land that I will *show* you.”

Imagine leaving your country behind, the place you know, the laws, the customs, the food, the routine, shared values. Goodbye, country.

And imagine leaving your kindred, relatives who know you and love you no matter what, people you have made memories and commitments with.

Finally, imagine leaving your “father’s house,” the place where you were born, where you’ve lived your whole life, a place of comfort and security, a property long ago paid for, and the house you know like the back of your hand.

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Imagine leaving country, kindred, your ancestral home, to go where? To go to a land that you have not seen, know nothing about, a land that God says, “I will show you.” You’ll just have to take it on faith.

Oh, and by the way, you are 75 years old. 75 years old. Anybody want to sign up for this travel package?

But here’s the thing: In order to receive the blessing, the travel package, the whole thing, is required. In order for Abram to be blessed by God, so that he might be a blessing to others, he must leave behind his security. He must step out in faith. There is no other way. Abram must risk.

And Nicodemus is in the same boat. He’s heard about this Jesus who is doing amazing things. But Nicodemus has a position in the community. He’s a religious leader, a respected teacher, with something to lose if word gets out that he is talking to Jesus.

So he tries to hedge his bets by coming to Jesus “by night.” And he gets into one of those patented misunderstanding dialogues with Jesus that we read in John’s gospel again and again. Jesus speaks on one level,

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an octave higher than Nicodemus understands. Jesus says, “You need to be born from above, or born again.” The Greek word can be translated either way. But Nicodemus misses the point. “What? Am I going to return to my mother’s womb?” Jesus probably sighs. He says, “Look, you’re supposed to be a teacher, tenured, full professor, right? Don’t you get it? I’m talking about a spiritual rebirth that comes from above, from God. A reorientation of your life so that you are focused on God’s greatest revelation, gift, and love through God’s Son. Through the gift of the Son, those who believe in him, not merely as intellectual ascent but as passionate investment of their lives, their very selves, receive the gift of eternal life, life lived on a higher plane of existence, not just at death but right now. But it requires trust. It demands the investment of your being.”

Like Abram, a gift is offered. But the gift can only be received by risking one’s life.

There is a scene in the 2012 Batman movie, “The Dark Knight Rises.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Djffli2PI7M> The villain named Bane has managed to capture Bruce Wayne (Batman’s alias) and put him down

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what looks like a giant mining shaft. It's actually an open-air prison, complete with cells and other prisoners. The only way out is to climb the rock walls several hundred feet high, circling round and round, making your way up by jumping from ledge to ledge. And near the top, is the longest leap of all, a seemingly impossible leap.

Not only are Wayne and the other prisoners mocked by being able to see freedom out of reach just above them, but they are also able to watch television in their cells, and they see the havoc that the villain Bane is wreaking on Gotham City, because, of course, there is no good person strong enough to stop him.

So Wayne/Batman begins training, push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, getting in shape to climb out of the prison. The day comes for his escape attempt. A safety rope is tied around him. Over and over the other prisoners chant in another language, "Rise! Rise!" He begins climbing, doing well, making progress. Then he comes to the longest leap of all, and he leaps, and then falls, crashing into the prison walls on the way down, caught by the safety rope just a few feet from death.

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He returns to training. Weeks go by. He's ready to try again. He ties the safety rope around himself and begins his climb as the other prisoners chant. He reaches the longest leap, jumps, and, once again, falls until he's caught by the safety rope.

More time goes by. One of the prisoners explains, "Fear is why you fail." Wayne says he is not afraid of death, but "I am afraid of dying in here." He begins the escape attempt again, but this time he even puts some items into a backpack for his journey once he reaches the surface. And this time he refuses the safety rope. Again, the other prisoners chant as he makes his way up, round and round, ledge by ledge. And then comes the final leap, the longest leap. If he misses, he will fall to his death. It's the ultimate risk. He leaps and with the strength that comes from his fear, and without the weight of the safety rope, he makes it. He climbs to the top and then throws a rope down for the other prisoners to climb out. Then he goes into the city to fight evil.

There is no blessing in the Christian life without risk of failure, pain, and sometimes, even death. There is no blessing for those who

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would pretend to follow Jesus but without the risk of loss. “Take up your cross and follow me,” commanded our Lord.

How many of us live our lives as though we were in an open air prison, looking up to see blue skies and freedom, but too afraid to make the dangerous journey to grab that freedom, to make a change, to think, say, or do something different that might grant us blessing, because there is risk involved? How many of us?

God told Abram to leave everything behind and to go where God would lead, to a place of blessing so that he might be a blessing to others. What is God calling you and me to leave behind so that we might go to a place of blessing to bless others?

Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be “born from above,” starting afresh, a reoriented life, so that he too might begin to live “eternal life” immediately. What birth “from above” do you and I need to experience, what reorientation?

For sure, if we try to follow where God leads us there will be dangers and suffering. We will experience betrayal. We will be

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misunderstood. We will be hurt. It's a risk, but in that risk lies the blessing, doesn't it?

Leave the safety rope behind. Look up. Climb toward freedom.

Leap! Amen. ©Jeff Paschal