

**Little Altars Everywhere**  
**Rev. Amy Rogers**  
**June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023**  
**Genesis 12:1-9**

**12** The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

<sup>2</sup> “I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.<sup>5</sup> He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.<sup>6</sup> Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup>The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring<sup>[c]</sup> I will give this land.” ***So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.<sup>8</sup> From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.<sup>9</sup>*** Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

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What a joy and privilege to be with you on this high, holy day to share in your celebration and to bring a good word. It was a good word for me when I received a message from Mary asking if I might be available to be with you today. It took me about a nano second to say Oh Yes! I want to be smack dab in the middle of *this* party. This day when you are making my friend Dayna absolutely miserable by putting her in the spotlight to celebrate her ministry among you. Thank you for allowing me to share with you in this time of joyful worship, Dayna Day!

We're going way, way back for these next few moments...not to the beginning of your shared story with Dayna, but back even further...to the origins of our shared overarching story...the true starting point of our sacred family history. Of course Genesis begins with the creation stories, where our wildly creative God brings humanity into being, then sets us free to roam and reign. But before we even get out of the first few chapters, we have messed it all up. Our God of second and third chances just keeps trying, so by the time we get past the forbidden fruit and the flood and a rainbow, God tries yet again, calling forth a family and a nation as recipients of a new blessing. A community with a new purpose. God's plan of creation and redemption is set in motion once again. And here at the beginning of chapter 12, God singles out a leader who will play a part in ushering it in. God calls Abram to form and help shape a new community.

But there are a few built-in challenges to overcome with the assignment. . A few obstacles in the way.

"Go from your people", God says to Abram. To a land I will show you.

Note: God fails to mention that there are already inhabitants in that new land.

"I will multiply your family and your descendants, promises God". Hold on...isn't Sarai barren? Isn't Abram a little old to become a dad?

Yet Abram responds. He listens. He goes. And while these stories are laden with human shortcomings, strife, and deception, the one thing the budding community learns to count on is that God is always *at work in their work*, in the ups and downs of their lives, God's grace is a constant. Abram somehow manages to keep his focus on the possibilities for redemption. And Abram's faithfulness and tenacity are rewarded by God salvific presence.

Abram took his calling seriously enough that a lasting community was built around and through him. Despite the roadblocks, in spite of the hardships, Abram kept the strong pull of God's love front and center. Stage by stage, movement by movement, Abram continued to say yes to the journey.

Traveling through a foreign land, when he arrives at the sacred site of Moreh, he stops and builds an altar to God because he knew God was with him. Moving on from Moreh towards the hills, Abram stops and build another altar to God. He Never forgets the source or the purpose of his new identity. Because of his faithfulness in what God was building, a blessed community took shape. And this many years later, we're still telling the story. We're still building on what

he built, with God's help. All because Abraham said yes to God in the midst of so many unknowns.

Jacqueline Lapsley, Dean of Princeton Theological Seminary professor of Hebrew Bible, has written that it was Abram's trust, not just his deeds, that allowed him to become a blessing to others. It was because he was open to the on-going relationship God offered him. In accepting *that* blessing, he could become a blessing to others.

She goes on to say that we don't always feel loved or blessed by God. We should, but we don't. Sometimes it's a fleeting feeling that is chased away by the grind of life. Culture values us for what we earn and what we produce.

But if that's our measure, Abram wasn't really good enough either. Consider his record: he also gave his wife to another man out of fear — twice, and he exiled his son Ishmael, and Hagar, Ishmael's mother, to a near certain death. It was Abraham's trust, not his deeds alone, that kept him moving forward. Blessing did not come from what Abraham *did*; he became a blessing to others because he stayed open to the on-going relationship God offered him. In accepting that blessing, he could become a blessing to others.

Dayna's friendship has certainly been one of the richest blessings of my journey of faith. Our friendship goes all the way back to the 1980's...to that era of hair spray and big bangs, of boom boxes, the birth of cable television and music videos, and the rise of the yuppies. It was a happenin time. But instead of being out there engaged in pop culture, Dayna and both found ourselves hunkered down within the walls of a seminary. , we had both said "yes" to a call to ministry, not having a clue, by the way, as to what we were getting ourselves into ... We both landed at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, TN,

We shared classes, internship experiences, and most importantly, we shared life as we figured out how to "adult" and to carve out a pastoral identify. In 1989, we graduated and were tossed out into the world and into our first respective congregations to act like we knew what we were doing.

Decades later, we both said yes to an invitation to be a part of a ministry cohort...a support group for weary pastors. And following that experience, we both said yes to an invitation to do a DMin program at Phillips seminary in my home state of Oklahoma. Actually, I'll pause here and confess that Dayna said yes to **me** when I talked her into signing up for the DMIN program along with me...when I realized part-way into the program that it was not for me, I said a

resounding “no”, and I jumped the train of academia leaving Dayna high and dry at that altar. And she still loves me...you do still love me, right Dayna? Of course you do. That’s how you roll. Always extending grace and allowing for second and third chances. That’s just Dayna’s way. She moves forward in the world with purpose and hope... extending grace to those around her who need an extra dose of understanding.

Today we celebrate another invitation to which Dayna said “yes”. But I’m here to tell you that she didn’t say yes without a fair amount of fear a trembling.

I remember getting a phone call ten plus years ago...Dayna and Dave were living in land-locked Iowa when she was contacted by a congregation in Orange, CA. We’re interested in you...you told her. We believe you just might be the one to lead us into our next chapter of ministry.

And Dayna trembled in her Iowa snow boots.

I can’t possibly be the one, she would say on the phone...repeatedly. This is scary. All new territory. A new land. That’s inhabited by Californians. What could they possibly be seeing in me?

And on occasion, she still has the nerve, to wonder if she is up to the task. Like so many of us pastors trying to lead in this wilderness time, Dayna and I and most every clergy person I know is currently asking how we’re supposed to know how to *do and be* church in this changing landscape. We’re not in Kansas anymore. Or in Iowa or even in Tennessee where we were first taught the tricks of the trade. We’ve entered a strange time in what has become a strange land. It a shorter and shorter leap in time to imagine how it must have felt to stand in Abram’s sandals and accept a call from God to lead by faith and trust.

A decade ago when *you* called Dayna to this post I had already seen in her what God had instilled in her. I had a history of observing Dayna’s holy tenacity. Her willingness to always keep moving forward. Roadblock after roadblock. Barrier after barrier. I knew of Dayna’s resilient spirit. Her god-given grit. Her gift of listening with care. The way she moves through the world with an inner compass oriented towards justice and compassion. Her raw, deep love for the other. For the stranger. For the outcast. For the one down on their luck. The love that Dayna’s pours into the word is not a sappy sort of Kum Ba Yah love, but one that fully

embraces the complexities of life's messes yet never relents on bringing a little bit of order and whole lot of grace in times of need.

I have witnessed it for 35 years, you have now witnessed it for ten...a decade of borrowing from the strength of Dayna's covenant with God. Everywhere she goes she builds altars of faithfulness, of compassion. Whether she's offering a kindness to a person living on the street...gathering a committee to figure out how make this church even more welcoming...or whether she is re-working a piece of liturgy to make it more accessible, more inclusive...each intentional action becomes a tangible expression of God's redemptive love. Each of these gestures creates an little altar of care in a bruised and bruising world. Like those who witnessed Abram building those altars of faithfulness *at every stop along the way*, you and I and host of others have been witnesses to Dayna's radical commitment to authentically living out the sacred value of radical, inclusive love. The heartbeat of this is her trust in the redemptive love of God.

So I say to you on this happy day...this day of celebration something I think already know. How lucky you are that Dayna, and Dave, journeyed west. How fortunate you are as a congregation to have a leader with so much integrity and grace. How blessed you are to be laboring together...sharing life together... creating altars in the world alongside such a gifted pastor, leader, true friend.

And by the way, she knows how lucky she is.

Happy Dayna Day.