

“Blessing and Promise”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent II – March 16, 2014

Genesis 12: 1-4
John 3: 1-17

What does it mean to be blessed? Each of us could answer that question in a different way. Some would say how they have been blessed with a loving family, with children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces and nephews, who all fill their lives with joy. Others would say how they have been blessed with a relatively healthy and long life, which they recognize is unusual and special. Still others would say how they have been blessed by being brought through some difficult times, when food and money was scarce, but today are able to live with security and peace of mind.

I have reached a stage in my life where I spend more time reflecting on how I have been blessed. I imagine I am more prone to such reflection because I am and will be experiencing greater transitions in life: loved ones who are aging, children who are quickly growing-up, friends and colleagues and family members who have died or are moving. When such transition and change seems to happen at an increasingly rapid rate, you begin to reflect on how God has blessed you in particular and meaningful ways.

Sometimes, we can be tempted to forget how blessed we truly are, as we get caught-up in our daily grind of work, school, and life. We grumble against God about truly minor things, but in our limited scope of view we feel they are major and huge. It's not until an emergency takes place that we are forced to recalibrate our outlook on life. We experience a health crisis, and we realize how blessed we have been to enjoy life without interruption or pain. We experience a child struggling with behavior or in school, and we realize how blessed we have been to have a loving, connected family. We experience the sudden death of a loved one, and we realize how blessed we have been with strong, loving, influential relationships of family and friends.

Generally, we understand a blessing to be something special and sacred that comes from God, and is often paired with a promise from God to us human beings. The language of blessing permeates the entire Scriptures, beginning with the creation story in Genesis: “So God created . . . every living creature that moves . . . And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply . . .’” (Gen. 1:21-22). We sing of the blessings which God has showered down on us every Sunday, for instance in praise songs or in the Doxology: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” And in our worship, we are blessed as we depart by the minister through the benediction. For me, the charge and blessing is the most moving part of the worship service. That is when I ask God to bless, abide, and remain with you, promising God's grace will never leave you as you walk your life of faith.

In our two scripture lessons today, we are reminded of God's blessing and promise to humanity. The biblical language of blessing and promise are intricately woven together, for whenever God offers a blessing, it is often accompanied by a promise to his children. And perhaps, in hearing these stories anew today, we can live renewed in our knowledge that God has blessed us with abundant life in Jesus Christ, who came not to condemn us, but to love each of us unconditionally and forever.

In the book of Genesis, the Hebrew word for "blessing," *barach*, is found 88 different times. And in these four verses from chapter 12, we hear the word "blessing" used five different times. Clearly, the notion of blessing is of great theological importance in this foundational book of the Bible. But, as we talked about Tuesday in our Lenten Bible Study, we really don't know a lot about Abram prior to this passage. In the previous chapter, we learn that his father, Terah, lived to the age of 205 years old, dying in his homeland of Haran. But, in a real sense, Abram and Sarai are introduced rather abruptly into the biblical witness with this story in chapter 12.

And yet, for such a short passage of scripture, it is truly one of the richest stories of the Bible. God tells Abram to leave what he has known, and go "to the land that (God) will show (him)." And the order of what Abram is to leave is revealing, from great to small: he is to leave his country, his kindred, and finally, his father's house (12:1). All that has been familiar and comfortable for Abram and Sarai – their home, their family, their ancestry – they are to leave behind. Think about that. How hard would it be to say goodbye to your house, your city, and your family, and go to a place that is foreign and strange? I think it would be very hard indeed to act on such a strange, difficult command.

But that command from God was not without a promise and a blessing. Think for a minute of all that has happened prior to this encounter. From the fall of humanity in the garden, to Noah and the flood, to the tower of Babel – God has become increasingly frustrated with humanity's inability to be faithful and obedient. God has tried to "start over" on a number of occasions, hoping that humanity would learn its lesson through these curses. I liken it to a parent who continually disciplines a child through punishment and consequences, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. Now, instead of cursing humanity, God seems to take a different approach, with a different servant. "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 . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:2-3).

Abram has no way of knowing if this will happen or not. He and Sarai have no proof that this promise will be fulfilled. All they have is their openness to hear this promise, and decide if they will trust in their God. Will they trust that God will keep them safe? Will they trust that they will have descendants and the "families of the earth"? Will they trust in God's direction and care?

As we read, they embodied their sense of trust in three short words: “So Abram went.” His actions spoke louder than any words he could speak. They heard God’s promise, they believed in that promise, and they trusted God would care for them. Abram and Sarai responded to God’s promise with enthusiasm, trust, and action.

Our second scripture lesson includes what is often described as “the most famous verse of the Bible.” And yet, as we discussed in the Bible Study this past week, reading that verse in its larger context helps to better inform us of how God so loved the world through Jesus Christ his Son.

In fact, this frequently-quoted verse from scripture was prompted by a visit from a Pharisee, under the cover of darkness, who did not wish for his presence to be revealed. Nicodemus was not like the crowds or disciples who followed Jesus openly and enthusiastically. He was “a leader of the Jews” who publicly did not accept this man who called himself the Messiah. And yet, Nicodemus himself must have been conflicted inside. He viewed Jesus as a rabbi, saying to him, “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God” (3:2). But he also is struggling to know who Jesus really is, and how he will change Nicodemus’ faith and outlook on the world.

When Nicodemus states that Jesus must have God’s presence with him because of the signs he performs, Jesus replies, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3). In some translations, these words of Jesus are translated “born anew” or “born again.” Many in the evangelical tradition point to this passage as why Christians must have “a conversion moment” for them to accept Christ. Indeed, Nicodemus took this literally, asking, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

Ted Foote and Alex Thornburg write: “Jesus’ wording points to the truth that our ability to encounter the kingdom of God comes not from our human striving but from a birth granted by God from above . . . The birth into the kingdom is one of water and of the Spirit. And this Spirit blows where it will. It comes and goes by God’s hand and not by our human will. To be born from above is to trust in God’s Spirit to save us as God is spiritually present in our physical lives . . . Being ‘born again’ is not a single event we necessarily point to and say, ‘That is when I was saved.’ There may be moments of God’s presence that are particularly powerful in our lifelong conversion, but salvation is not dependent on them . . . Conversion is less about a particular time and place and more about lives lived in trust to a God who chooses us and who continually loves us to wholeness” (Foote and Thornburg, Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt, Geneva Press, Louisville, 2000: 3-4).

In essence, Jesus is saying to Nicodemus – and to us – that to believe in God fully and completely, you must let go and believe in God’s promise for humanity. That promise is inherent in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That blessing is assured in his birth, his ministry, his suffering and death, and his resurrection on Easter morning. That blessing and promise comes not out of spite or anger or frustration or condemnation by God. It comes out of

hope and love: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life” (3:16).

God blesses humanity with life in the blessing and promise of Jesus Christ. God blesses the nations of the earth with life in the blessing and promise made to Abram and Sarai. God’s blessing and promise are for life abundant for us, his children. How do we respond to this incredible blessing and promise?

Two nuances from these passages of scripture might speak to our faithful response today. The town which Abram’s family left was called “Haran.” In Hebrew, that word means “highway” or “crossroads.” Abram and Sarai were literally at a crossroads as they heard God’s call. Many times we find ourselves, as individuals and as the church, at a crossroads in our faith. And, as he did with Abram and Sarai, God is waiting to see how we will respond – in our words, our actions, our faithfulness. Perhaps we can remember, in those critical crossroad moments, that God’s call is rooted in a promise of life, and our faithful response should come out of gratitude for that blessing.

Second, this is not the only time Nicodemus appears in John’s Gospel. He makes a brief appearance in chapter seven, when Jesus is before the Pharisees. But it is at the end of John’s Gospel that we witness how far Nicodemus has grown in his faith since this encounter in the night with Jesus. After Jesus has died on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate to ask permission to take Jesus’ body and bury him. And, as we read in chapter nineteen, “Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes . . . They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths” (19:39).

Nicodemus – who struggled to believe, who was conflicted between his hope and his tradition, who asked questions in private for fear of persecution – Nicodemus eventually showed compassion for Jesus, as he recognized the depth of God’s love for him and for the world.

The lesson for us? It’s never too late to trust in the promise of God, and live a faithful life of gratitude for God’s blessings. Because “God did not send him into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (3:17).

Thanks be to God. Amen.