

BLESS YOU

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 12, 2016
Based on Genesis 12:1-3, Jeremiah 17:7-8; Luke 6:20-23a***

One of the foundational stories of the Bible is the passage we heard in Genesis 12, where God says to Abraham, “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. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” [Genesis 12:2-3]

In those two verses the word “bless” or “blessing” appears five times, and the word appears again, in one form or another, more than five hundred times in the Bible. Nowadays we most commonly hear the phrase “bless you” when someone sneezes, where the words don’t mean much; but there is great significance when God says, “I will bless you.” (Genesis 12:2) What does it mean to be blessed by God?

Typically, we think of someone who is blessed as someone who has a lot of good things. A person who has wealth and health and a happy family and a long life is blessed. There is something of this notion in the Old Testament. But Jesus finally would turn that whole idea of blessing on its head. Jesus’ own life—a short life beset with hardship and persecution—hardly fits the classic notion of the “blessed life”, and when Jesus taught about blessing, he described the blessed life as almost the opposite of what we typically think it to be. He said, “Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who weep, blessed are the persecuted.” Blessing must mean something other than having everything go just dandy.

In Hebrew, the word for blessing is *berachah*. It is very similar to the Hebrew word, *beraichah*, which means “pool or spring.” And here is a clue to its meaning. To be blessed is to draw on the waters of God’s grace; it is to be in connection with the enlivening Spirit of God. As the prophet Jeremiah put it, “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. They are like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream, having no fear when heat comes, being not anxious in a drought; but its leaves stay green and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

This explains how Abraham could be described as “blessed” even though his life was anything but easy. If Abraham had fit our notion of the blessed life, he would have stayed in the big city of Haran, lounging in a hammock. Instead, he followed a call of God that took him far into the wilderness where things did not always go smoothly. His expectation of having a child was long delayed, there was considerable stress at times in his relationship with his wife, Sarah, he was dragged into some fights going on between unpleasant neighbors, and he never really settled down but was constantly wandering from place to place.

Yet the Bible says he was blessed. He was blessed because no matter how difficult his circumstances were at one time or another, he lived in communion with God— he lived out the principle expressed later by Jeremiah: Blessed are those who trust in the Lord. The

life of Abraham, in fact, illustrates several key truths about what it means to be blessed and how we can experience God's blessing.

What is blessing? Blessing, first of all, is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness is an emotion that may come or go, and people can be happy for the wrong reason. Osama bin Laden was happy on 9/11, but he was not blessed. Abraham, conversely, may not always have been happy as he trudged through the wilderness following a difficult call of God, but he was blessed.

Along a similar line, blessing is not the same thing as good fortune. Last month, a guy on Long Island won a million dollars in the lottery for a second time. But even winning the lottery does not make a person blessed. Indeed studies have shown that people who win lotteries are quite often more discontent after they won than before— because the sudden wealth throws people spiritually off kilter; they lose the ability to appreciate the simple things and struggle to maintain the right perspective in life. In the case of Abraham, we would have to say that he drew the short straw in being chosen by God to head out on a very difficult journey at a point in life when most people want to be enjoying retirement, and yet in being so chosen he was blessed.

Blessing is also not the same thing as “success.” Our culture defines the successful person as one who achieves wealth and status and notoriety. Abraham did achieve wealth, at least in the terms of his day— he had lots of sheep and goats— but Jesus later taught that you can be blessed even if you are completely unsuccessful in the world's eyes; as he said, “Blessed are you poor.”

So what is blessing? Blessing is a condition of spiritual wholeness which we find by being in authentic harmony with God. Thus we can stand in God's blessing even if we encounter failure and misfortune and difficult times. Blessing is a spiritual state that transcends our outward circumstances. It is the condition of the tree described by Jeremiah that is planted by the water— “having no fear when heat comes, being not anxious in a drought (there are tough times); but its leaves stay green and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

The key aspects of what blessing is— and how we are blessed— can be clearly seen in the story of Abraham.

The first thing we see is that we are blessed because God chooses to bless us. God says to Abraham, I will bless you. You cannot make yourself blessed. We can find blessing only in God.

This means that we are blessed by God's grace— God's unmerited love. Abraham did not in any way earn God's blessing. God's blessing was a free gift. The grace that God shows to Abraham is the same grace that God would ultimately show to the whole world through Jesus Christ. We do not earn or deserve what God does for us in Jesus. But God through Christ bestows salvation and promise upon us; the blessing of God is offered freely.

Blessing is then received by us in faith. Again we see this plainly in Abraham, who trusts in the promises God gives him and follows God's call. We today receive God's blessing in the same way -- by putting our trust in Christ— or to use the imagery of Jeremiah, we receive God's blessing by sending out the roots of faith to draw in the water of God's grace.

As we come into God's blessing, several things will happen in life, which again can be clearly seen in the life of Abraham. The most fundamental aspect of blessing is something we have noted already— to be blessed is to share in fellowship with God. Abraham journeys with God in response to God's blessing.

But then further, to be blessed is to become connected with God's purpose. In the same moment that God pronounces blessing upon Abraham God speaks of a great plan that is to unfold through Abraham's descendants. Abraham is blessed because he becomes a participant in God's eternal purposes.

This means finally that we are blessed as we become a blessing for others. In the image of the tree, Jeremiah spoke of the tree "bearing fruit," and God spoke very much in these terms to Abraham, as God said, "You will be a blessing," and finally, "Through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed." This promise— that through Abraham the whole world would be blessed -- would come to ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, who brought God's blessing to all humanity, and thus Jesus becomes the perfect picture of the truly blessed life. Jesus is blessed because he is a blessing for others.

Precisely here the Biblical concept of blessing stands in sharp contrast to prevailing contemporary notions about success, good fortune, and happiness, all of which are very much me-centered. To live a blessed life is to live a life orientated towards God and toward God's concern for all humanity.

This then is why the blessed life is often not easy. The blessed life typically involves difficulty, as we are drawn by God to engage ourselves for others. The journey of Abraham, and the journey of Jesus and his disciples, was hard.

The story is told of Teresa of Avila, a Spanish nun, who worked tirelessly to spread the gospel in sixteenth century Spain, that one day she was riding in a mule-drawn cart through the driving rain, when the cart hit a bump and overturned in the mud. As she drew herself up, drenched with frigid water and caked with mud, she said, "God, if you do this to your friends, you should understand why you have so few."

Many people today are not interested in what the Bible calls the blessed life precisely because they want a life that is easy. The lifestyle exhibited by Biblical figures such as Jesus, Jeremiah, and Abraham, or later historical figures such as Teresa, does not look attractive. People would rather have good fortune and all the trappings of success.

But the blessed life offers something much deeper and much richer, a life in which finally there is not just a fleeting feeling of happiness but a real and lasting joy. As this sermon series continues, we will consider more fully what the blessed life is and how we can experience God's blessing by looking at what Jesus said about it all. But the Bible gives

us a foundation in the story of Abraham, where the good news is that God desires to bless us and God acts to bless us. May we respond like Abraham and like Jeremiah— to put our faith in the Lord, that we may be like that tree drawing in the waters of God's blessing and promise.