

“Whose Blessing Is It Anyway?” Rev. Michele Ward

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

June 11, 2023 Genesis 12:1-9a, Romans 4:13-25

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

The second reading today comes from the Epistle to the Romans.

Listen now for a Word from God.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.

For this reason the promise depends on faith, in order that it may rest on grace, so that it may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (who is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”), in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So shall your descendants be.”

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He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), and the barrenness of Sarah’s womb.

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Therefore “it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone but for ours also.

It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

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Blessing is a popular word among Christians, particularly Protestants in Western countries. I did a Google search for the words blessed and blessings. I had my suspicions validated when I saw pages of items for sale that depict various versions of blessings that each of us could purchase for our home, ourselves, our families, and our friends. Allow me to share a few highlights:

- Too blessed to be stressed - this was the title of a devotional, a calendar, on several t-shirts and home decor
- #ble\$\$ed - replacing the letter s with the \$ sign to suggest that financial prosperity is the same as a blessing
- Blessed to be a blessing. - this is the most biblical of the group
- #blessed - has turned into a cliché hashtag on social media that anyone can use now to make a humble brag about their successes
- Count your blessings. - a reminder to be grateful. In its worst form, it can be used when someone is expressing sadness to dismiss their grief or difficulties because their blessings outweigh their struggles

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The reason we’re spending all of this time on the concept of blessing to today is because Genesis and Romans are full of these words and use them to make claims about who God is, who we are, how God relates to us, and how we relate to God. I believe that the Protestant conception of blessing has become misconstrued with other ideas such as the absence of struggle, financial wealth, and transactional faith, when the concept of blessing in the Bible does not necessarily mean any of those ideas. Blessings are not outcomes we can predict or prepare for in any way. Blessings are gifts. Blessings are surprises. Blessings are even treaties of peace in the Old Testament.

I’ll be preaching on both texts today, so I’ll jump in between readings. Let’s start with some Genesis. God tells Abraham many different things about blessing:

- I will bless you, and make your name great
- In order that I make you a blessing.
- I will bless those who bless you.
- In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed

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Now, Paul’s concern is about the blessing and whether it transfers to other believers. He is a Hellenistic Jew, a Roman citizen, and a person of Jewish faith who believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. He reframes the story of Abraham’s blessing, not as the culmination of the law, but emphasizes the role that faith has played in the blessing that God extends to all people through Abraham. Paul calls it ‘the promise’ in Romans 4, but is referring to the ‘the blessing’ in Genesis 12. This is another case of language and translation. Translations of ancient languages are insufficient. It is like trying to find a new word to encapsulate the poetry of an old word. You may remember that Andrew and I sometimes use a phrase like “the prayer we do not have words for yet” or “the unspoken prayer of our heart.” This is because even words in our own languages fall short of what we want to express and communicate to God and to one another.

The word blessing is like this.

It is easier to define what it isn’t rather than what it is.

A blessing is a hope,

it is a longing,

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it is a desire,

It is the way my neighbors call out “Be safe!” when we say goodbye.

it is a promise,

it is peace,

it is belief,

it is a commitment,

it is a dream for ourselves and the ones that we love

it is the way parents pray with their children before they fall asleep

Blessing is a way of being

It is a way of living It is a way of doing

Not an object

Not a fancy house or a big paycheck

A blessing is the cool breeze on a summer day.

A blessing is generosity,

a blessing is a surprise gift

A blessing is inside your mind, fills your heart, and gives you

strength. A blessing comes when we stop striving for one.

A blessing comes when we least expect it.

Blessings are intangible gifts that remind us of God’s faithfulness.