

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
March 12, 2017 - LENT #2
Gen 12:1-4a & John 3:1-17
“Blessing”

In the reading from Genesis this morning we heard the Lord say to Abram, “Go... and I will bless you so that you will be a blessing, and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Abram is promised a life of blessing if he but steps out in faith to be led by God to where, he does not know. He is being asked to leave the familiar, step out into the unknown, and to follow in faith. If he does this, he is promised not only a life of blessing, but that he himself will be a blessing, and through him, the generations to come will be blessed. For someone wondering if their life has meaning and purpose, this would have been an amazing message!

And the more amazing thing is that we are given the same message. In the reading from John we heard that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.... in order that the world might be saved through him. “ Jesus was sent as well, that all the world might be blessed. All we need do, it sounds simple enough, is to believe and to step out in faith. We need a commitment of the heart and a willingness to act.

So a blessing is a wonderful and powerful thing. And as Christians, we have this directive to live into blessing. To accept and receive God’s blessing, to live into our blessed life, and to be God’s blessing in the world.

The meaning of “blessed” is to have God’s favour and protection. From the Greek, the word was used in Jesus’ day to refer to the kind of life the gods lived - free of human suffering. The word was also used to refer to the wealthy whose riches and privilege protected them from the kind of suffering the masses endured. In this way, the lives of the gods and privileged people were considered to be blessed.

Jesus turned the meaning of “blessed” upside down. Instead of referring to the quality of life provided by wealth and privilege, he used it to mean those who were in relationship with God, those who were willing to receive God’s love, allow it to change them, and in turn, offer their lives to be used to bless others.

Jesus’ new meaning of “blessed” has still yet to be fully understood, or even understood correctly today. In Prosperity Theology we see the old Greek meaning of blessing at play where Christians believe that their righteousness is rewarded here on earth with wealth and happiness. A good Christian can be known by how well off they are. As if they can earn God’s blessing. Phrases like, “I don’t deserve this,” or “He had it coming to him,” come from this kind of thinking. This kind of thinking rests on reward and punishment and the idea that life is in our control and that the fruits of our labour are ours alone.

The kind of blessing Jesus is referring to is different. We see this in the reading from John where Nicodemus is struggling to understand what Jesus means when he says, “No one can see the

kingdom of God without being born from above.” The Greek here translated as “from above” can also be translated as “anew” or “again.”

In other words, there is a literal birth, as from our mother’s womb, and there is another birth, a spiritual birth. This spiritual birth has to do with choosing to receive God’s blessing and to become God’s blessing. It’s about being fully in relationship; not about acquiring things or about life being easy. It’s knowing one is never alone and knowing a peace that passes all understanding. It’s about having the faith to love, even when there are risks. As there always are!

This life of blessing requires being able to see and hear with new eyes and new ears. It means understanding the power we’ve been given to bless, love and encourage each other. It means cooperating with the Divine scheme.

I’ve been blessed by two fathers in my life. They gave me a taste of the Divine blessing which is all we are called to do.

The first blessing came from my biological father when I was a teenager. Let’s just say as a teenager, I was not a happy camper. I had dropped out of school for the 2nd time and was at the end of my rope. I grew up in Vancouver. I decided the grass must be greener on the other side, so I cashed out my life savings and ran away. I caught a bus headed for California. At 15, I guess I didn’t look old enough to be crossing on my own so I was questioned at the border. When the border guard called my home number, my younger sister wailed, “She’s run away!” which led the guard to ask for my father’s work

number. When the guard reached my father and explained the situation to him, my father asked to speak to me. He asked me what was going on. He asked if I would like him to come and get me. I just knew I didn't want to be rescued, so I said, "I just need to get away." We talked some more and then my father said, "If this is what you want to do, you have my permission as long as you agree to call for help at any time." I handed the phone to the guard who listened to my father's instructions, slammed down the phone and said to me, "Your father doesn't give a damn about you." I burst out crying. And boarded the bus, knowing I had my father's blessing, and holding that close to my heart, I crossed the border. What happened after that is the stuff for another sermon some day!

The second blessing came at my wedding. My father-in-law was a devout Roman Catholic. When Jim and I sent out the invitations to our wedding, he balked. Because I wasn't a Christian, we had decided not to get married in a church. Hap decided he couldn't come. It was against his religion. But when he heard his wife making her own plans to come, he reluctantly changed his mind. The day arrived and we gathered in the penthouse of our housing co-op with both of our large families and a few close friends. After Jim and I exchanged our vows, we opened the floor for the community to bless us. One by one, people shared poems, songs and prayers. Jim's 4 sisters were all too emotional to speak and the tension built as we waited for a blessing from Jim's side of the family. Finally, Hap spoke up and blessed our marriage. The whole room exhaled. The deed was done and everyone

was relieved. His blessing was not misplaced. With love of both our families our marriage blossomed. And my relationship with Hap did as well. On my 50th birthday he wrote me, "You are no longer my daughter-in-law, you are my daughter."

Our power to bless is a real power. We have little idea of what God has given us to do and with what power. Our blessing supports, affirms, lifts up, reassures, and speaks to the sacredness of life. Blessing saves. And the one of whom we say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," has come into the world not to condemn it but to save it. Yes, we are saved as individuals, but as John's gospel clearly states, God is interested in saving the world. We are saved as the Body of Christ. And as a body, we are called to bless and take care of one another. Our ability to accept blessing and give blessing is God's sign of hope to the world.

This morning let's pay attention to parts of the liturgy which involve blessing. We acknowledge Jesus as blessed and as His followers, receive God's blessing. And then we are sent out into the world to be blessing.

For all this, what can we possibly do but give thanks!!

Amen.