

In Search of a Living Blessing

A Sermon by **Rev. Laurie McKnight-Walker**

Biblical References: Genesis 12:1–4a, John 3:1–17 **Date:** February 17, 2008

Do you want a living blessing from God? If finding a blessing is about becoming more healthy, vibrant, with a greater sense of well-being, then of course we want a blessing. As you know, Will and I celebrated the blessing of 25 years of marriage by taking a Caribbean Cruise which was indeed truly wonderful. A couple that we met on the ship were definitely on the cruise to seek a blessing, for their marriage and for their health.

The wife, a woman in her 40's, was recovering from breast cancer and so spent much of her time in the spa, languishing under hot lava rocks, pricked with acupuncture needles, or being swathed with some seaweed compounds that would help to detoxify her body. She also sent her husband off to every spa treatment they offered, I think so he would have the same experience of renewed health and maybe be a somewhat 'new and improved' husband. As you can imagine, this kind of a blessing requires a fair amount of money and leisure time.

Then there is the blessing we seek when we are feeling completely hopeless, up against it, and wonder what the future might bring – blessing or curse. For Abram and Sarai, they were afraid for the future of their family, which in that culture was everything, for Sarai was barren, unable to conceive. In their culture, having many children around you knees, especially sons, was the sign of God's blessing, or so they thought.

Yet it was at that point of human hopelessness, where humanity is stripped of its own power to create a new beginning and participate in God's blessing, that the work of Yahweh comes into focus. God is the one who initiates the gift of blessing with Abram. God promises that Abram will become a great nation or people; he will be blessed and become a source of blessing for all the families of the earth; he will have a great name that God will give him. This recalls the story of the Babel where the people say that they will make a name for themselves and they are denied that. Later on of course Abram, is promised a land, a land which he never actually gets to own, other than a small plot where they will bury their dead. The thing that we want to remember though is that in their state of hopelessness, even at an old age, the living God encounters them, and offers them a blessing.

As a church, do we want to be blessed by the living God? I am reading a book right now called *Becoming a Blessed Church* by Graham Standish which explores what it means to be blessed and how we go about experiencing that blessing. He says that a blessed church is a vision, a glimpse of a healthy church uniquely grounded in a relationship with God that allows blessings to flow through it. I fully agree with him when he says “I believe that above all, mainline churches are called to become blessed churches, to become places where god's blessings are tangibly experienced. They are called to be a healthy place where people devote their lives to God the Creator, Christ, and Holy spirit, and where healing occurs.” pg 22 Over the next few Sundays we will explore together what it means or what are the marks of a blessed church.

So, do you really want to receive God's blessing? If the answer is yes, then be prepared for some change. The promise to Abram that he would become a great blessing to all the families of the earth also came with a radical call. You heard it once already today but maybe you didn't really hear it: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.” The very thing that Abram longed for, he had to give up, to let go – land and family tradition. It was only when he let go of those things and placed his trust fully where God would lead him, that the blessing would come. What an incredible model of faith for us, especially for us here at Queen St. as we continue to listen for God's call to us as a congregation.

Jesus seems to indicate to Nicodemus who has come to him with questions about spiritual blessing and seeing the presence of God, that in order to receive and experience of God's blessing, you must be born from above. You must be willing to let go of your own ego strivings, your past, who you have been in order to freely follow the Spirit which blows where it wills. That seems like scary stuff and it is no wonder that Nicodemus says, "how can these things be?"

Yet Jesus encourages Nicodemus to trust his words and his wisdom by promising him that those who trust in God and in him, that they will not become lost, perish or die, but that they will receive eternal life.....Now that is a blessing!

Graham Standish, an American pastor, indicates that blessed churches are those which embrace transformation, becoming something new as God leads them. To shift from being an established, traditional church to be a transformational church takes a huge amount of faith, risk-taking and courage. Those churches who become blessed churches have leaders who have a vision for change, who have the confidence to make changes and who, above all else, seek what God wants for them and their community of faith. In blessed churches the leadership has a strong sense of hope for the future, that future blessings are coming from God. This hope prevails even during bad economic times, amid troubling world and national events, and despite congregational crises. They have a strong sense that God is with them and will make good things happen, especially if they remain faithful, even if it means going through terrible times of struggle and turmoil.

Are we afraid of experiencing God in all of God's fullness and power in our lives? Are we afraid of the challenges that God may have in store of us in the future and do we in our hearts doubt that God will provide? Is it really just up to us to figure out our own survival, to hunker down and keep plodding forward one day at a time? Indeed we would not be human if we did not have questions, doubts and temptations to go it alone with little sense of hope or divine providence.

But then we remember the people of faith who have gone this way before us – the ancient patriarch Abram at the age of 75 left his homeland to start a whole new life only trusting that God would lead them; and then his wife Sarai who was surprised as anyone that she could bring new life into the world in her old age. She gives new meaning to "freedom 55" – freedom 99!

But more than anything, we remember Jesus, who although he was tempted to go it alone, to follow the world's standards of success and blessing, chose over and over again to listen to where the Spirit was leading him, to follow, and whether in good times or bad, to place his trust fully on God alone. Even death itself would not deter the purpose that God had in store for his life. His resurrection ensured that the blessings that he received everyday because of his faithfulness, would continue to bring blessing and hope to others.

We all may have fears, doubts, questions about the future. Life is never without challenges. If only we could receive that blessing to for our lives. My friends, the good news is that the promise of God's blessing is still offered again today for God is seeking us still until everyone in God's family has been touched with an awareness of their holy purpose. Through Jesus we are invited to receive those blessings today in real ways as we share bread and juice at the table where our Lord is host.

In this season of Lent we do not repent in order to know something we once lost, to cling to old traditions, but we are called to turn around, to let go, to journey forward to something new, to be born again, to move to the edges of our spiritual maps or maybe even our physical maps.... for there, in that open-hearted, anticipating place we call faith, God's very own Spirit will anoint us with the very power and presence of eternal life. What greater blessing can there be.