

The Blessing

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Second Sunday in Epiphany

We have an interesting set of texts to work with this morning:

Over the past weeks of Advent and through to this Second Sunday in Epiphany, I have been noticing how many blessings have appeared in our lection readings.

We have heard the blessing of Hagar, of Mary, of Abraham and Sarah, Elizabeth's blessing of Mary when she comes to visit; the blessing of Hannah, Mary blessing God in the Magnificat,

Hannah blessing God, Adam's blessing of Eve, Jesus welcomed and blessed by the Shepherds and Wisemen; and during the Christmas Eve Service we also read the blessings from Simeon and Anna to the baby Jesus. Then this Sunday we have the baptism of Jesus and God appearing in the form of a dove and blessing him, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

As I was reviewing all the instances of blessings, I was surprised at the variety in the kinds of blessings. I want to share some of what I have discovered.

When we think about the blessings of Hagar, Abraham and Sarah, Elizabeth and Mary, at first glance they seem to be about the blessing of having a child. For many of us who have lost children, or never had children, it is hard not to get hooked or triggered by the way the Bible places such emphasis on having a child. Especially now, in this political climate, it is hard not to see these scriptures as extolling the virtue of women being just a vessel rather than true participants in their own lives. But let's dig deeper and get beyond the literal and move into a deeper place and see what these blessings might mean.

Hagar was enslaved and being abused by her mistress and her master. She had lost any control she had over her life. The angel recognizes this horrible situation and tells Hagar that she will have a child whose name means "God Hears" and that she will become a mother of a nation.

Her blessing was recognition of her terrible situation and a legacy. Through her a nation would be born and thrive. She

would matter, she would create a legacy, even if right now it felt like there was no point to her life. The blessing gave her hope, gave her a purpose and the realization that she mattered.

For Abraham and Sarah, the blessing was a bit different. Yes, they would birth a nation too, but their blessing was a reminder that they could not force God's hand just because the promise seemed impossible. Their blessing was a solemn reminder that they were not God, and that their efforts to make things happen were foolhardy. Their blessing was both a promise and a rebuke for trying to fulfill the promise on their own.

And then there is Elizabeth, an older woman who is suddenly surprised to find herself pregnant with a promise of something new and essential for the world. In fact, her husband, Zechariah, is so stunned by this promise that he becomes mute for the duration. Elizabeth's blessing was the radical idea that despite age or improbability, we are capable of giving birth to something new.

After my mother died, my dad decided to go back to Japan and serve as a missionary again. He was close to 80 by then, he had a disability and needed braces on his legs so he could walk, and his hearing was quite bad even with powerful hearing aids. But he really wanted to go. My sister and I decided to support him even though we were worried about how he would get around in Japan and whether he would even be able to communicate with people. Fortuitously, the week he would arrive in Japan, I would be finishing up some work that I was doing there and could fly from Tokyo to the city he would be living in and help him move into his new life. When I arrived, he was still suffering from jet lag. He seemed confused, had trouble knowing what to buy at the grocery store since he had not cooked for himself for many years and was quite worried about whether this was going to work. One of his biggest worries was keeping track of the finances, as my mother had

done that. After going to the grocery store and picking out some simple things that he could cook for himself, we found a notebook and I started showing him a simple way to keep track of his money. We were working on it for just a short while and he turned to me and said, "I think I can do this!" And I said, "I know you can!" He stayed in Japan off and on for the next six years.

At his memorial service, which we hosted on zoom during Covid, I was surprised by how many people who talked about his impact on their lives, and how much they loved the banana bread he made. (He called it banana bread evangelism!) Many were people who knew him not when he had first lived in Japan when he could hear and his legs were strong, but those who knew him in recent times, when he was old, had trouble hearing and found it hard to get around.

Now let's consider Mary. What can we say about her blessing? We know that from the very beginning Mary seemed to be aware of the cost of accepting this blessing. In her Magnificat she courageously accepts this calling and blesses God for giving her the opportunity to do this essential thing for the healing of the world. But she must have realized early on that she might suffer in order to fulfill the promise. Her blessing was, as the prophet Simeon said, "a two-edged sword that would pierce her heart," and yet without her courage we would not be sitting in this room today and the world would be a very different place.

Every year during the Christmas Eve Service we hear the blessings given by the prophets Simeon and Anna to the baby Jesus. In our readings, Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his arms and says to God, "...my eyes have seen your salvation, a light for revelation...and glory for your people..." and Anna talks about Jesus to everyone waiting for a redeemer. These are blessings of potential: the desire, hope and promise that healing and salvation will come to this broken world. That's a lot for a baby to carry, isn't it?

For years, every time I heard the blessings by Anna and Simeon, I had a slightly heretical fantasy. It goes like this: maybe Simeon and Anna weren't quite sure if they would be able to discern who the promised Messiah would be and so, just to be sure, they blessed every single child who came into the temple with these words.

Would that make a difference? I have thought about that more and more since my grandson Vander was born. What if each child born was seen as capable of saving and redeeming our world?

In our gospel reading today, John has been baptizing people in the Jordan River and there is much speculation that maybe he is the Messiah. John rejects that suggestion and tells the people that someone else is coming who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus also comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John and after his baptism, God appears in the form of a dove and says, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

In this blessing, Jesus is claimed, named and blessed. God claims Jesus by calling him Son, names him as The Beloved, and then declares the blessing...with you I am well pleased. Isn't this what we all want? This blessing? To be claimed by God, to be called Beloved and be told that God is pleased with us?

I want to note something very important here. This blessing happened before Jesus began his ministry. It happened before he was tempted in the wilderness, it happened before his first miracle at Cana. It happened before he had even begun, and yet here is God blessing Jesus, not for what he had done, not for what he was going to do, but just because he was who he was.

How often have you been blessed for just who you are?

What if we are all claimed, named and blessed just for who we are? Not because we are important, or exercise faithfully, or read the lections, or journal or do the work we have been given? What if before all that, before we were even created,

God had claimed, named and
blessed each one of us.

Actually, that is exactly what the prophet Isaiah says God has done and is still doing, even now. In the Hebrew scripture reading for this Sunday, Isaiah proclaims, "The Holy One says, I have called you by name, you are mine...because you are precious in my sight...and I love you..." We have all been claimed, named and blessed just for who we truly are.

Blessings can sometimes be complicated. Sometimes it is hard to discern their meaning. Like Mary who, after the Shepherds and Wise Men came, "...pondered all these things in her heart." And sometimes blessings push us to do more than we thought we could.

In our reading from Acts, we hear the story of the apostles in Jerusalem sending Peter and John to Samaria to those who had accepted the word of God and been baptized. When they arrived they laid hands on them, blessed them and they received the Holy Spirit.

If you had told Peter and John or any of the other apostles when they had first started following Jesus that someday they would be blessing Samaritans, they would surely have been shocked and surprised.

Sometimes blessings can take us by surprise or cause us to change how we think or give us the freedom to do something we didn't think we could do.

Back in the late 1990s in my work as a legal interpreter and translator of Japanese, I began working with a Texas law firm who was representing a Japanese wholesale shoe company that had contracted with a tennis shoe company in Texas who wanted them to sell their tennis shoes in Japan. The US company was trying to compete with Nike, Reebok and other brands in the Japanese market. We had to translate documents and prep many

Japanese witnesses for a trial that was held in federal district court in San Antonio, Texas. One of the witnesses was a low-level salesman, who was going to talk about all the efforts they had made to sell the Texas company's shoes. He was key to the case. We began the trial, and he was one of the first witnesses to be called.

He got on the stand and he froze. It was a disaster. All the practice, all the review of his testimony was gone, and he could hardly talk. Thankfully, it was late in the morning when he began, and we were able to break for lunch in the middle of his testimony.

I talked to the interpreter who had prepped him, and she was completely at a loss as to why this had happened. The attorneys were completely freaking out because the rules concerning testimony of witnesses state that no one could ask him what was wrong while he was still testifying. And so, in the car on our way back to the hotel where lunch was waiting, I tried to figure out what had gone wrong.

I remembered a conversation I had with him and several other witnesses early on when they had first arrived in Texas. This witness had told me that in all the years he had worked at the Japanese company he had never personally met the president of the company. He saw him from afar, or if there was a companywide meeting he saw him on the dais, but never close up. He said that it was so strange that now here in the US he was suddenly even eating at the same table with the president and that it was quite uncomfortable and disconcerting.

I knew that in the courtroom the president was sitting at the table with the lawyers as the representative of the company and when the witness came in to testify, he must have seen the president there and got scared that something he might say or do would be contrary to what the president or the company wanted. I told the lawyers what I thought, and they agreed that the president should say something to him to allay his

fears.

During lunch the president entered the room and went and stood behind this poor witness, put his hands on his shoulder and said in Japanese, "Son, I want you to tell the truth as you have practiced with your attorneys. Do not worry about any consequences to the company or to me or anyone else. I will shoulder the blame for whatever happens. You do not have to worry. Just tell the truth as you know it and all will be fine. I know you can do this."

He gently patted him on the shoulder a couple of times and then left the room. As I looked around the room there were tears in the eyes of the witness, the interpreters, the other Japanese witnesses, and even the American lawyers who, although they did not understand what the president had said, knew that something profound had just happened.

The witness finished eating his lunch, went back to court, sat on the witness stand and nailed his testimony. The Japanese company won that case in large measure because of that testimony.

Blessings are profound, sacred and lifegiving? Who have you blessed recently?

Who has blessed you?

Every time I serve as liturgist, I see the benediction as an opportunity to give a blessing. As you know, I often choke up or get tears in my eyes when I do this because I feel the sacredness of that simple, yet profound, act. In that moment, the liturgist reminds us that the Holy One has claimed us, called us Beloved and is always and continually blessing us, just for who we are.

Amen.