

Sermon on 2 Lent A: Genesis 12:1-4a

Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on 2-17-2008 by Pastor David Van Kley

Blessing

At text study last week, one of the pastors remarked that she'd asked some of the children in the congregation what their favorite part of worship was. A dangerous question! Several of the little kids said that they liked the blessing they received during communion; others liked the congregational blessing at the end of worship most. The pastor theorized that they liked those moments because they were receiving an unconditional gift.

Not to be too cynical, but I suspect they like the blessing at the end of the service best because it is, well, the end of the service! I certainly felt that way as a kid: after sitting for an hour and forty-five minutes, when the pastor summoned us to our feet and spoke the blessing, I had already made the transition to roast beef, football on TV, and phone calls from my friends. But I guess it wasn't **just** that. There was something in the words themselves and the deep silences between them, as if **God** were in them! "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

We seldom speak words of blessing in our culture—other than to say "God bless America" or sometimes, when people sneeze, "Gesundheit" or "Bless you!" Still, we **do** bless people, especially when we part from them, for a day or a year. We exchange kisses and hugs or we shake hands and say, "Goodbye. Love you. Take care of yourself. See you soon." As if to say, "we bless you with the gift of our love—we can't go with you, but know that our **love** will go with you."

In the ancient world, blessings were believed to **create** the reality they proclaimed. Remember how Jacob in disguise stole Esau's rightful blessing from his dying father, Isaac? When Esau discovered the trick, he asked Isaac to take back his words, but Isaac said he couldn't. What was said was as good as done: the blessing had already entered Jacob's bloodstream and penetrated all of his bones!

Today's first lesson is the story of Abraham and Sarah, a childless couple, well past middle age, minding their own business in Haran, surrounded by members of their extended family. Suddenly, God said, "I will bless you and give you children despite your age, and those children will be a blessing to the wide, wide world." There was a catch: "Go, leave behind your family and homeland and travel into the unknown."

We're not told how Abraham and Sarah felt, but I suspect they were both honored and afraid. A blessing from God is a powerful thing, which compels action. Abraham and Sarah were wise enough to obey the blessing. The rest of Genesis is the story of their adventures and misadventures, faith and doubt, joy and sorrow, and the birth of one son in their old age whom they named "Isaac," which means "laughter," because it really was pretty funny to have a child so long after menopause!

Isaac's descendants **did** become a blessing to the world, though not in a way his parents could have foreseen! Joseph, sold into slavery in Egypt, rose to power there and fed a hungry world. Moses went up Mt. Sinai and returned with the Ten Commandments only to find his fellows worshipping a golden calf. David, the ultimate adulterer, wrote the psalms, which comfort those who are victimized in many ways. Through a Son of David named Jesus, God's love took on human flesh and extended both arms to embrace the world, only to have them locked into place by an executioner. Through him, Nicodemus and so many others of us have been given new and eternal life. Through Abraham and Sarah, God blesses us and the world.

I don't know where you're at today. Maybe on cloud nine, like Pastor Kent and Elisabeth. Blessed with Elijah Morris, they know he will be a blessing to many. Maybe your health is good, your job fulfilling, your family delightful! It's easy for you to talk about blessing! But maybe your cup is brimful of sorrow today, because of poor health, conflict in your family, and financial problems. You don't feel blessed and can't imagine how you could bless anyone. To you, God says, "You also are heirs of Abraham and Sarah, children of God in Christ. I bless you. Go now in the power of that blessing. Not that you'll be rich or famous or even happy all the time. But my love goes with you. And through that love, you are empowered to bless the world!"

Interesting that God chose a couple of senior citizens to start a family. Today's society doesn't know what to do with the increasing number of seniors. The social security system is bankrupt. Health care costs skyrocket. Nursing homes are full! And the baby boomers are just now coming of age. What will we do? I don't know the whole answer, but I do know this part of it: elderly people don't just need to be cared for, they have been gifted and called to care for others. They have been blessed in Christ to be a blessing.

Pope John XXIII changed the face of the Roman Catholic Church and encouraged the dialogue between Christians that has removed so much of the hate and misunderstanding between us. Do you know how old Pope John the 23rd was when he took office? **77** years old. And you thought **John McCain** was getting old!

When I think of our congregation, many, perhaps most, of our hardest working, most giving and committed people are older people. On Friday, I needed help cutting wood for a family in need. To whom did I turn? Two men, one in his mid-seventies and the other in his early eighties! That's very typical! Where would we be if senior citizens actually sat in rocking chairs? As William Sloan Coffin once put it, "old age is dying young as late as possible." Older people are an incredible source of blessing!

Of course, God blesses people of all ages and sends them out to be a blessing. Caitlin Kurtz and Katie Paulsen are getting ready to travel to Colombia this week. They have been blessed: your gifts have made this travel possible. Think of it! When most of us were kids, we were lucky to go on a trip across the **state**! Today, all kinds of things

are possible. What a blessing for Katie and Caitlin! And believe me, their presence while also be a great blessing to our partners in Bogotá!

I was with Bishop Dave Zellmer at a parish study last weekend. The people of the congregation were sitting on the “pity pot,” bemoaning the fact that their numbers had diminished. What to do? Dave said, “Ask yourself this: when people in your neighborhood go to bed at night, are they able to say, ‘What a blessing that church is to our community! I’m so glad that church is here!’” That’s the question we always must ask ourselves.

When I was a teenager, some of my friends drove really fancy cars. I’m not sure where they got the money: I suppose they earned some of it, but I think most of it came from their parents. Corvettes and Mustangs were the cars everyone wanted. A Corvette could make you popular overnight! The girls would automatically hop into your car—or so I believed. But a funny thing: those cars didn’t get much use! Their owners wouldn’t expose them to road salt, so they’d put them up on blocks during the winter. When spring came, they avoided any sign of a pothole or mud puddle. When they went over railroad tracks, they’d slow to a crawl, as if walking on compacted ice.

Most of us didn’t have the money to own a Corvette. My first real car was an old Chevy II, with rust holes the size of dinner plates. I drove it everywhere. People like me took their cars to school and work, out camping, wherever. We bought our cars to use them. And we drove them until they didn’t run anymore.

By the blood of the cross, we have been purchased. God blesses us in Christ and uses us as vehicles of blessing, as long as we live. God may want a few fancy Corvettes, but mostly Chevys and Fords and Hondas, people with rust holes the size of dinner plates, people with 150,000 miles on them, people with and flaws and doubts, but people who will answer the call and move forward in faith.

People like Abraham and Sarah.

People like you and me. Amen.