

Blessing: Mary's Visit to Elizabeth (Advent 3)

Genesis 12:1-9 & Luke 1:39-45

Call to Worship: Philippians 2:5-11

December 12, 2021

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

Though I hear it fairly often now, I remember the first person who ever told me to “have a blessed day.” It was Mr. Billy Washington, commonly known as Mr. Billy, who I knew as a cashier at HEB in Gonzales. Mr. Billy would always ask how you were, and no matter how you responded, if you asked him in return how he was, “blessed” was always his answer. And then once I completed my transaction and the sacker and I loaded up my basket, he would, without fail, tell me to “have a blessed day.” Mr. Billy, it turns out, was also a pastor, at the Church of God in Christ in Gonzales, a predominately African American congregation. He died last February, and everyone who had ever encountered him told basically the same story. “Mr. Billy always said ‘have a blessed day’ every time he saw me.” It’s a gift to live with the kind of integrity that allows every person you meet to have the same experience of you—Mr. Billy was consistent everywhere he went and with everyone he encountered.

Now I never asked Mr. Billy what he meant when he told me to have a blessed day, or when he said that he himself was blessed. The checkout line at HEB is not a good place for in depth conversations, of course. Given that Mr. Billy held at least two jobs at the same time and lived in this country as a black man, that he didn’t mean “My life is easy, and I never have to worry about anything.” I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean that. I’m pretty sure Mr. Billy was formed by Scripture and had a complex and complete idea of what being blessed mean. Again, I can’t say for sure, because I never asked him, but let’s take a look at what a Biblical understanding of being blessed might mean.

Both of the scriptures we read this morning have something to tell us, and they agree on at least two things about blessings and being blessed. First, being blessed does not mean that you will never face hardship, that you will have everything you need, that you will have no struggles, that you are showered with material goods or money. That’s not it at all. Let’s look at Abraham first—God blesses him, promises to make his name great and to make a great nation of his descendants. And all of that happened, but it was not without hardship and threats to God’s promises and blessings. Remember the story of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac? That horrifying episode alone lets us know that being

blessed by God doesn't mean that one's faith in God will never be challenged in unimaginable ways.

Elizabeth calls Mary blessed twice within just a couple of verses. Before Mary can even spill the beans about Gabriel's visit, her pregnancy, or even congratulate Elizabeth on her own baby, Elizabeth bursts out with "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," again words that are familiar to our Catholic neighbors, because they are part of the "Hail Mary" prayer. It has already been obvious to Mary, and will become more and more clear to her, that she is indeed blessed. But that blessing doesn't mean freedom from struggle or worry. I'm going to quote from the book we're using for Bible Study (The Journey, by Adam Hamilton, pg 69). *"This blessedness was not to be confused with ease or comfort or a well being that came from possessions. To the contrary, Mary would face the whispers of those who would know she conceived out of wedlock. She still faced the task of telling Joseph she was with child. She would face the difficulties that came from being the mother of Jesus—fleeing to Egypt when Herod sought to kill the child, watching as others sought to destroy him when he began his ministry, and finally standing by as he was crucified. This was what blessedness looked like for Mary."*

Being blessed, for Mary, for Abraham, for Mr. Billy, and for all of us then, simply means that we have been noticed and given a particular calling and task. We are part of God's plan. We are called to work in God's mission. It doesn't mean we'll be rich and famous, or that we will never worry or grieve or know any of the hardships that afflict humans on a regular basis. But knowing and joining in God's plan for the world, meant that Abraham and Mary both were blessed.

The second, quite important, thing about being blessed, is that it means you are to share that blessing with your neighbors, with the world. Blessings are not meant to be kept to yourself, or hoarded or guarded. They're meant to be shared without limit. God is pretty specific about this in the promises to Abraham. Twice within a couple of verses. *"I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."* And then, *"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* God's promises and blessings to Abraham are not meant for Abraham alone. They aren't even meant for Abraham's family and descendants alone. God's blessings are meant to be shared and expanded to all the families of the earth.

Just after Elizabeth calls Mary blessed, and they rejoice together, Mary sings her song, and in its beginning words, she says *"Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed."* She is aware, and willing to take on the

responsibility, that this baby she carries, will change the world. In this baby, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

It all fits together, really. Being blessed comes with some trials and tribulations, and may not look like blessings to the rest of the world. But the ways God blesses and calls us fit in with God's plan for the world, God's mission, and that plan is that all the world will be blessed.

When we receive God's blessings, we receive them as God sends them. Though we know God's calling may not be easy, the blessing comes in being invited and included in God's mission to bless all the families and people of the earth.