



The ABC's of Advent: Blessing December 5, 2010

Bless this word proclaimed, and we who hear it, O Lord, that in the blessing of your love, we may be a blessing to others. Amen.

Last week as we began our Advent series on “The ABC’s of Advent”, I invited you to see and reflect on the ways you were anticipating and experiencing the reign of Christ within your lives. The question of curiosity now is, how did things go? I know I had a difficult time experiencing and anticipating the reign of Christ breaking into my life.

This week our focus is on blessing. Over meals, we pray a common blessing, “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed.” The prayer is a reminder that both the food on the table and the family gathered around the table are blessings – gifts from God. The prayer thanks God for the many blessings that have been received in life. In the days and weeks leading up to Thanksgiving, we were frequently reminded to “count our blessings”, meaning to give thanks back to God for all of God’s graciousness and goodness to us.

Sometimes in the world today, we lose sight of what the original meaning of blessing is.

Blessing in the Bible means God’s favor is bestowed upon a person. This favor is either given by God himself, or by God’s representative. The book of Psalms especially is filled with language of blessing, whether it be a prayer asking for God’s blessing to be granted to those praying the Psalms, or the blessings of God being praised. We hear in Psalm 72, our Psalm for today, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things”. Blessing has always been part of God’s covenant, and God’s plan for humanity. Blessing and receiving blessing is based off God’s love for us, rather than on anything we do or do not do.

Psalms is not the only book of the Bible filled with God’s blessing. While Pastor Straw was here last year, he used “The Jesse Tree” as part of the Advent observance. The Jesse Tree is filled with symbols of the promises made about Christ’s coming, and the blessings that would be received. Adam and Eve were not destroyed after eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. In faithfulness, Noah received the blessing and the promise that the world would never be destroyed again. Likewise, Abraham received the blessing of being the father of many nations. Isaiah shared the blessing with Israel. This blessing also had the promise, that in spite of everything being uncertain, there would come a time when that which had been cut off and cut down would sprout new life. In this new life, a new rule would grow from it.

It is this same blessing we hear through John the Baptist. John the Baptist has often left me intrigued. While I am intrigued by what we do not know about him, I am also intrigued by what we do know about him. Matthew recognized John the Baptist as a prophet through his clothing, his choices in food, his appearance, even in how the crowds responded to John the Baptist.

John recognized in the audience those who were sincere in wanting to change their ways, and those who came out for curiosity’s sake to see who this unusual and unique person was. Regardless of how or why the crowds came to see John, he calls them out. John the Baptist challenges their assumptions that because they are descendants of Abraham, they will be saved from the judgment that is to come. John the Baptist argues their connection to Abraham will not be what prevents them from escaping God’s judgment. John the Baptist recognizes God’s ability to judge, to separate the good from the bad, to separate the wheat from the chaff. By doing so, John the Baptist challenges those who hear to an accountability, honesty, and integrity that demands walking in God’s paths. This challenge is not for the faint of heart.

Throughout the Bible, we are reminded and challenged to trust in the Lord, to seek God's paths, and God's plans for our lives. When we seek God's plans for our lives, we will be blessed, and we will inherit the kingdom of God.

Being a blessing in the world is not a matter of boasting about the blessings we have been given, or how we are a blessing to others. If anything, our being a blessing to others is something shared with us when others thank us for the help we have given them. Likewise, people are blessings to us, when we call to mind the ways we have been helped, or the new lessons we learn from others.

Repentance and blessing go together. In order to receive the blessings from God, we need to change our ways. We need to turn back to God. Change is never easy. Undergoing a complete lifestyle change is even more challenging. For the demands of changing one's life and following in God's footsteps demands much from us. It is a matter of giving up people, things, habits that keep us from God. In giving up that which keeps us from God comes also the wisdom, the insight, and the courage to recognize the second, third, fourth, even millionth chance we have been given to receive the blessing.

A wise supervisor once told me that 'insanity is doing the same thing over and over, and expecting different results'. Meaning, every so often we find ourselves in patterns or situations that we may wonder how we got ourselves into. During those times, we need to take a step back and reflect on how we could have handled or done things differently.

Repentance is different from that. Repentance is a matter of turning life around in a new direction and embracing the blessing of receiving a second chance. By doing so, we anticipate different – rather than similar results.

As much as it pains me to share this example because of being a Cleveland Brown's fan, consider Philadelphia quarterback Michael Vick. Despite many who disagreed with this decision, Vick was given a second chance to play football. Vick has turned his game – and his life around, placing the Eagles in a place they did not expect to be.

Perhaps the more classic example of repentance and blessing is that of Scrooge from Charles Dickens "A Christmas Carol". Scrooge was miserly and miserable. After being visited by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, Scrooge came not only to repent and recognize the error of his ways, but also to receive a blessing he had never expected. By receiving the blessing, Scrooge became a blessing to others, leaving Tiny Tim to proclaim, "God bless us everyone!"

In a world filled with confusion, fear, and uncertainty, we need God's blessings in our life. Not only do we need God's blessings, but we need also the grace to recognize God's blessings in our lives as gifts to be treasured, and the grace to use these gifts wisely that we too may be a blessing to others.

During these remaining days of Advent, may you be blessed by God's presence in your life, that you may be a blessing to others, and by being a blessing, may help others anticipate Christ's coming into their lives as well. And "may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13)