

Blessed?

When we think of the word blessed, what do we consider that means? How do we judge the result of being blessed? In our passage from Luke this morning Elizabeth greets Mary with: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Mary herself uses the word blessed when she says "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed." How do we understand these uses of the word? How is Mary blessed? The easiest meaning for blessings attached to this passage comes from our faith tradition. Surely to be the mother of our Lord is a sign of being blessed. How does that affect our understanding of what it means to be blessed in our lives? Or does it? Our context looking at these passages comes with knowledge of the life of this child and the one that Elizabeth will bear. There are many descriptions of being blessed throughout all of scripture. How do these texts interact with the Luke passage and with our understanding of how God blesses? The first call of Abraham to get up and leave his father's tent contained the promise of blessings in terms of descendants and land. Abraham was also told that through him the world would be blessed. From our point of view Mary's child is God's fulfillment of the covenant promise to Abraham, that way that the world would be blessed. In scriptures blessings and curses are often coupled in the text. Although there are several words which are translated as curse, but there is only one word used for blessing—baruk. From the context of the passage the content of a blessing includes many things: vitality, health, longevity, fertility and numerous progeny. Many of these things seem to fit our current understanding of being blessed. Sometimes when we hear of an impending birth we will refer to it as a "blessed event". When someone is restored to health that restoration is often spoken of in terms of being a blessing. The first listed meaning in Webster's current dictionary for blessing is to make or declare holy by a spoken formula or sign. The last words spoken each Sunday morning as we prepare to leave our sanctuary form what is called a benediction. A benediction is the act of speaking, bestowing or requesting a blessing. The benedictions which I pronounce express the hope that God will be present during the time we are apart. Luke's narrative of Jesus' birth begins with visits by angels, those beings who are the messengers of God. The first visit described is to Zechariah telling of the future birth of John the Baptist to his wife Elizabeth. The second visit is to a young girl in the village of Nazareth who is greeted by the Angel Gabriel as "favored one". This visit is called the Annunciation as the message given to her was to announce that she would bear a son who would be known as the Son of the Most High. She was to give birth to the one who would be given the throne of his ancestor David. This visit described today is also remarkable is less celebrated one. This is the story of a visit between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. Both women are pregnant unexpectedly. Elizabeth we are told is beyond child-bearing age and Mary is a young unmarried girl. The greeting Elizabeth gives Mary when she arrives for this visit is "Blessed are you among women." This greeting has been combined with the greeting Gabriel gave Mary of "favored one". Together they form a traditional prayer called "Ave Maria" or in English, "The Hail, Mary". But really when you view the context into which these greetings are spoken, it would seem that they are both profoundly ironic. "Favored one," Gabriel says. "Blessed are you among women..." says Elizabeth. What a strange kind of "favor" it will be; what an ironic "blessing" it is that will come to this young girl in the years ahead. Think about it. First, there will be a scandal as Mary's swollen womb become visible to the watching eye of her fiancé and her village. Matthew tells us Joseph

briefly considers breaking the engagement. Hard-lines in the village could have demanded a stoning for such apparent indiscretion. Blessed indeed. Such an Ironic favor. And in the ninth month of her pregnancy, of all times, there will be a long and exhausting journey to the south, to Joseph's ancestral village of Bethlehem, all because some government bureaucracy demands it for reasons of census and tax accounting. Blessed indeed. Such an ironic favor. And at the end of this journey; when the birth comes, circumstances will relegate this mother to the place where the animals stay. There is no mother or grandmother present. There is no midwife in attendance to help with this birth. And this child, her firstborn, the light of her life, will spend his first night in a manger, an animal feeding trough. Blessed indeed. Such an ironic favor. As Luke continues the story when Mary and Joseph bring this child to Jerusalem for his circumcision they encounter an old prophet name Simeon on the Temple steps. Simeon takes the child and praises God because God has promised him that he will see God's salvation. This, Simeon proclaims has now occurred. Then Simeon gives Mary ominous news about her sons life ending with: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." These may be words which will haunt Mary for nigh onto thirty years. Blessed indeed. Such an ironic favor. And then, perhaps as she has always feared, Mary's firstborn son will follow a road that leads him away from her, away from Nazareth, away from a quiet life as a village carpenter and into the heart of controversy, then shame and finally tragedy. Mary will follow him all the way, all the way to a city dump on the outskirts of Jerusalem which is called "Golgotha", the place of the skull. She will stand at the foot of a Roman cross where she will watch the unspeakable happen to her son. Blessed indeed. Such ironic favor. Elizabeth and Gabriel's ironic greetings which named Mary "favored" and "blessed" invite us to an eternal question. What exactly does it mean to be blessed? What is a "blessed" or "favored" life? In secular terms the question might be phrased, "What exactly is a "good" or "fulfilling life?" Does a full life mean a life that's perfectly smooth? Does a favored life mean a life without disappointment or loss, a life without tears? Is a blessed life simply an easy life? I am not sure that I think there is such a thing as a totally "easy" or "perfect" life. Dr. Scott Peck, a psychologist began a book he wrote with these words: "Life is difficult." He goes on for over 300 pages expounding on this observation. That life is difficult he says is a great truth, but a truth that no one wants to believe. Instead, most folks want to believe that life should be easy. I admit that I have seen lives that look easy from the outside, lives that have looked smooth and effortless to me and others. However, almost always there are things which although they may not appear to the eye of an outsider, have been events of sorrow and grief, pain and suffering in those lives. Sooner or later, every life passes through sorrow. In time, everyone will have disappointment in their lives. No one who ever takes a risk is ever totally immune from failure. No one who dares to love deeply is ever spared the loss of someone loved. If "blessed" means perfectly smooth and ever-easy, then no life is "blessed." But let's consider that maybe, just maybe, a blessed life means something different, something more than an easy life. Neither Gabriel nor Elizabeth promised Mary a perfectly easy life. And God does not promise you or me perfectly easy lives either. But Gabriel and Elizabeth do relate a promise to Mary. It is hinted at in the address by Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation. Listen to the rest of Gabriel's first words to Mary: "Greeting, O favored one. The Lord is with you." That is actually the great promise given to us. Not a life of ease, but a life with the presence of God through all of it—through all the things that happen because the truth is that living is filled with difficulties. There is no divine promise of a comfortable life. No

assurance of a life free from disappointment and sorrow, no matter how much we desire that. The promise is simply this: God is with us through all of it. Whatever comes, we are not alone. We don't go through our days pointlessly in a God-empty universe. We don't live in some dark, hollow, godless void. The promise is not ease, but presence. This promise, first given to Isaac the first child of the Abrahamic covenant is that God will be with us. This promise is the precise meaning of the whole Christmas drama. Christmas is the narrative promise that God is not "up there" or "out there", but here with us. The promise implicit in the nativity story is that God has chosen not divine distance or majestic isolation. Instead God has chosen to enter into the nitty-gritty earthliness of human existence, my human existence, your human existence. That God is with us is the insistent trust that somehow transforms the lives of the faithful throughout their lives. This trust that we are not alone can empower us to come through rough stuff, difficult things. The rough stuff may lead to greater strength and stronger faith. I don't believe that God sends the rough stuff—the adversity that comes to us all at some point. That's just how life is. But I am sure of two things—first, whatever adversity brings, we are not alone in it. God is with us. The second thing is that the presence of God in your life can empower you to not just get through it, but to rise above it and make something good happen from it. In this life it is so often the hard places, the rough roads, the lonely miles that finally really open us to God, to life, to one another. I have a copy of a book titled *The Gospel According to Peanuts* by Bob Short. He wrote a Christmas meditation in it which goes like this: "The way Christ first came into the world is also exactly like the way he must come into the lives of each of us: he comes in the night, our own personal emotional nights; he comes into winter's deep coldness, the coldness of the heart that all of us sooner or later will feel...; he comes into the empty loneliness of the field, into the sense we can have of being desperately alone..." When some lonely time teaches you afresh about the love of a neighbor who reaches out to you...when some loss gives you a deeper love for friends and family...when some emptiness in your life opens up a space for God to enter, then...in spite of it or through it, you like Mary are blessed—ironically blessed, but blessed none the less. You are not alone. Emmanuel has come to you. Thanks be to God.