

Promise of Blessing
Genesis 12:1-3 Luke 2: 21-40
Lexington Presbyterian Church
December 30, 2018

The promise of blessing runs through the entire Biblical story. We can start with the story of Abraham. God's promise to Abraham was that he would be a blessing to all nations. At that point Abraham was 90 and had no children. We need to stop looking for practicality in promises from God. But promises are made: that Sarah will have a child; that water shall never cover the face of the earth again; that Moses will lead the Israelites out of Egypt into the "promised" land; that Jesse will have a son named David who will become a King of Israel; that a child has been born for us, a son given to us, authority rests on his shoulders and he is name Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9: 6). The promises of the New Testament begin with the birth of Jesus, the promised Messiah but with a completely different skill set than the world was expecting. There are promises of healing, feeding, teaching, loving and ultimately salvation for a broken and hurting world. And into the future there are promises of a new heaven and a new earth.

Even as I name these promises, these hopeful issuances of blessings, we know that our human shortcomings often sideline the fulfillment of these promises. Certainly, that is evident in the faith journeys of most of the people in the Old Testament: think of the conniving Jacob, the hesitant Moses, the scheming David, the insubordinate Jonah. In the words of Dr. Sibley Towner, my professor at Union Seminary, "Think what profound risks God has taken to disclose the divine will and purpose for us through the medium of human experience!" And yet, God is faithful still working through the frailties and vagaries of human nature to work out the promise of blessing that God has for us all.

Perhaps that is what Simeon and Anna saw in the baby Jesus as he was brought to the Temple by Joseph and Mary to adhere to the Mosaic law of purification and redemption after a birth. Immediately both prophets knew that they were in the presence of the Messiah, the promised Savior of Israel. Simeon blessed the child and the parents while praising God for the fulfillment of the promise to see the Messiah. Anna too praised God knowing the effect that this baby would have upon those in Jerusalem and beyond. Amazement was Mary and Joseph's reaction as they began to get a glimmer of what it might be like to be parents to God's son.

And within this very Jewish setting at the Temple in Jerusalem, performing the rites of the Mosaic law, in the presence of two prophets who were models of faithfulness and obedience, bringing offerings of turtledoves, Simeon names not only Israel but included Gentiles and indeed all peoples as those for whom this child, this light of the world, was born and named "Savior." Walter Brueggemann says about the birth of Jesus: "The gift of Christmas contradicts everything we sense about our own life. Our world feels unsavable and here is the baby named Jesus - 'Savior.' Our world and our lives often feel abandoned, and here is the baby named Immanuel, 'God with us.'"

In a way we look at the new year as promise of blessings. The possibilities are numerous - new job, new baby, a grandbaby, a baptism, a child beginning kindergarten, a graduation, a marriage, retirement, a long-planned trip, a new house. How do we live into these promises that truly make them blessings? It was not planned that Simeon and Anna would be at the temple at the moment that Mary and Joseph walked up the steps to the Temple. All of them were simply living out their understanding of God's plan for their lives. They were acting in accordance with what they had been taught - following the tug on their hearts to obey the Word of God.

There is nothing in the world that can un-do what God did with the birth of Jesus.

After 8 days, the time came to circumcise the baby. He was called by the name Jesus, which the angel had given him before he had been conceived in the womb.

When the time came for them to be purified according to the law of Moses, they too him up to Jerusalem to present him before the Lord. That's what the law of the Lord says: Every first born male shall be called holy to the Lord.' They also came to offer sacrifice, according to what it says in the law of the Lord 'A pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout, waiting for God to comfort Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. He had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Led by the Spirit, he came into the Temple. As Jesus' parents brought him, to do for him what the law's regulations required, he took the baby in his arms and blessed God with these words:

'Now Master, you are dismissing your servant in peace, just as you said. These eyes of mine have seen your salvation, Which you made ready in the presence of all peoples: A light for the revelation to the nations, And glory for your people Israel.'

His father and mother were amazed at the things that were said about him. Simeon blessed them.

'Listen,' he said to Mary his mother, 'this child has been placed here to make many in Israel fall and rise again, and for a sign that will be spoken against (yes, a sword will go through your own soul as well), so that the thoughts of many hearts may be disclosed.

There was also a prophetess called Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of great age, having been widowed after a seven year marriage, and was now eighty four. She never left the Temple but worshipped with fasting and prayer night and day. She came up at that moment and gave thanks to God, and spoke about Jesus to everyone who was waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

So when they had finished everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong and was full of wisdom, and God's grace was upon him.