

“Exploring the Concept of Blessing”
Isaiah 43:1–7; Acts 8:14–17; Luke 3:15–17, 21–22
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The concept of blessing sounds nice and pious, biblical even, but its unreflective use can be downright irritating. It cheapens the nature of the concept and reflects a limited view of God’s love.

“Have a blessed day!” people will say cheerily, and with good intentions, for the most part, but what does this mean? If blessings come from God, we have no control over them. We don’t choose to be blessed or not blessed.

“We have been richly blessed,” people will say, indeed, many of us will say, but what does this mean? As an expression of gratitude, it is a good thing, but in many circumstances, if my good fortune has come as a gift from God, this raises a question about people around me whose fortune has not been so good.

For example, if my home and family have been spared in a tornado, but my neighbors have lost everything, is it because I was blessed and they were not? If God chose to bless me and not them, why would this be the case? Were they less deserving? According to Christian tradition, none of us is worthy but all are loved.

I realize this may seem like over-thinking, which I am prone to do, but this is not over-thinking, it is just thinking, and it is provoked not only by everyday experience but by the texts we have read today.

The reading from Isaiah contains profound words of assurance yet also deeply troubling words. God assures the people they have nothing to fear as their exile is about to end. God has redeemed them and called them by name. When they walk through fire, they will not be burned. God has created them for glory, but apparently only them, because the text says that God gives Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for them.

One nation is favored, blessed, chosen, while others are not? And it doesn’t help that the specific nations mentioned here happen to be

Arab and African nations, leading some to this day to conclude that people from certain continents and ethnicities have less value. Is this really how God views things?

In the reading from Luke, Jesus is baptized by John, though Luke, like the other Gospel writers, is almost apologetic in his telling of the story. It may seem odd that the greater figure here is baptized by the lesser figure. This actually argues for the authenticity of the story. No early Christian evangelist would invent it!

But Luke doesn't really describe the baptism itself. He says that when all the people had been baptized, and Jesus also *had been baptized*, and was praying, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

For Jesus, therefore, baptism is an experience of blessing, a time when he feels God's love and affirmation in a way he will never forget. It is an experience that will help sustain him in times when he may be tempted to question his identity and calling. When he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he is imprisoned and beaten, when he is put to death on a cross, deep down he knows he is still the Beloved. Like the people to whom Isaiah speaks, he has nothing to fear; even if he walks through fire, he will not be burned; God has created him for glory.

And as I have said many times before, baptism conveys this kind of blessing and affirmation for us as well. We are not the Beloved, but we are loved by God. In baptism we confess our need for forgiveness and commit our lives to Christ. It is an act of witness or testimony. But it is also an experience of grace, knowing we are loved, chosen for a purpose, blessed.

The people in the reading from Acts have experienced this reality, and Peter and John make sure they have the full experience which includes the gift of the Spirit. In the book of Acts, the Spirit comes at different times — before, during and after baptism — but the Spirit always comes as a sign of God's blessing and a form of empowerment.

But only those who are in Christ know this blessing, only those who are baptized in water and with Spirit. Does this mean that others are not blessed, that they are valued differently by God? In a Flannery

O'Connor short story entitled "The River" a young boy named Bevel who comes from a troubled family is baptized in the river. When he comes up out of the water, the zealous preacher says to him, "You count now! You didn't even count before."

Is this really the case? We don't count to God until we embrace this ritual? We say that faith is all about grace, God's love for us in Christ, and giving our testimony and being baptized is simply a way of participating in this grace, accepting it, but if we are not careful, it simply becomes just another form of proving our worthiness.

I am not devaluing baptism. I wrote a dissertation on it! Nor am I in any way dismissing or relativizing the central claims of Christian faith. I am simply raising the question of what our status as blessed and beloved says about other people. Are they of lesser value to God?

The answer of scripture is, "No!" God's love is unconditional and unlimited. This means it is not based on merit of any kind. It begins with creation. Our reading from Isaiah echoes the language of Genesis, using the same Hebrew verbs *bara* (create) and *yetzer* (form) in saying that God created and formed the people. Here the reference is to Israel, but in Genesis, God creates the whole world and all the people in it. All are created by God and loved, known by name.

Isaiah also uses the language of redemption — from the Hebrew *goel* — and applies it to Israel, but the Jesus story extends redemption to all and even before Christ, both Genesis and Isaiah speak of being chosen for the benefit of others, being a light to the nations. So, as with creation, the focus of redemption is on all people.

For God to love or bless one person or people does not mean that God does not equally love or bless other persons and people. God is a like a doting grandparent who says to a grandchild, "You are my favorite!" and that child believes it, but that same grandparent says that to every grandchild. Now, I actually was my grandparents' favorite... and you may have been a favorite as well, but we are all God's favorites!

This is the biblical message. It's not controversial, though it seems that way to some. But what do we do with the claim in Isaiah that other nations — Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba — are given in exchange for Israel?

The best interpretation I am aware of was articulated in the thirteenth century CE by Rabbi Kimhi who insisted that the three nations mentioned should not be generalized but understood in a very specific way at that time (workingpreacher.org). These nations to the south presented a threat to the Persian Empire. And so, a part of why Cyrus the Great was willing to release the Israelites was that he was more concerned about these nations. Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba were only ransom in a figurative sense. God did not literally trade Israel for them. God simply worked through the realities of international conflict and shifting perceptions of power to redeem the people.

One scholar summarizes in this way. “The images of the opening verses of Isaiah 43 are of a God who redeems what and whom God has created. God gets intimately involved, and is willing to pay the price to set the captives free. If other nations choose to wage war, then so be it. God will work, in the meantime, to bring freedom and redemption to the downtrodden (Corey Driver, workingpreacher.org).”

This makes sense. The fact that Israel is blessed by God in this narrative does not mean others are cursed. God is simply using complex realities to help the people in exile. God cares about all people, including these other nations, even those who are enemies, and this is not just a Christian teaching, though we find it on Jesus’ lips – love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44). But there is a Midrash that says that in the Exodus story, when the Egyptians drowned in the sea after the Israelites had crossed on dry land, the angels started to sing, but God quickly stopped them, saying, “My creations are drowning and you are singing before me?” The Egyptians belonged to God too.

The bottom line in all of this is that all people matter to God, all cultures and ethnicities, all nations and continents, every individual we know and even those we don’t. All are valued and loved by God.

This has one application at an individual level. We should view ourselves as being beloved, created in the image of God, valued; but we should also view everyone else in the same way. We don’t get to write anyone off because they are different, we don’t agree with them or we

just don't like them. It's okay to speak of feeling blessed in sense of being grateful to God for what we experience, but it is critical that we not leave room for any presumption about others not being blessed.

But there is another application at national level. The idea that America was founded as a Christian nation is flawed historically and theologically. The founders were a mixture of Christians, Deists, agnostics and others. What they shared was a desire to do away with established religion because they had experienced the downside of it. Even if they had wanted to found a Christian nation, it would not have made sense to do so. The Hebrew canon documents God's efforts to extend salvation to the world through a nation. It didn't work. The Christian Testament proclaims a new divine methodology — to work not through a nation but through a new kind of Savior. Christian Nationalism, which is closely wed to white supremacy, is an oxymoron.

It is fitting that we feel grateful for the freedoms of this nation and the Judeo-Christian principles which have shaped it, along with many believers whose faith was a motivator for public service, but we need to remember that the whole world belongs to God, and our calling to serve as witnesses to the ends of the earth includes all the people in it. It's why we are so deeply committed to missions work, largely through CBF, and make such a big deal about the Global Missions offering we launch in December. We believe that every person in every nation matters to God, and as a result, they are included in our calling.

At a Seder, many toasts are shared, including those for the ten plagues that were a part of Israel's deliverance. Wine is a symbol of salvation in Judaism. The story cannot simply be remembered with words. The faithful are invited to imbibe, to drink in, its meaning. But some wine is intentionally spilled as a way of taking in the good news of deliverance without glorifying the suffering others, as in the Egyptians, experienced in the process of it. It is a way of making sure the people who celebrate redemption remember that others still suffer.

It is a healthy way for us to think about the concept of blessing. Thank God we experience good things, God help those who do not, and help us to remember them too.