

Sunday - November 15, 2009
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner
Sermon - **Landing the Plane**

Scripture: Gen. 12:2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace, for you are our rock, our Lord, and our redeemer. Amen.

This morning we're thinking together about the concept of blessing. The sermon title does not appear to have anything to do with blessing, but we'll get into that later.... I like "teaser" sermon titles.....

You know, I've always wondered why it is that we say "God bless you" when someone sneezes --- this is practically a universal statement -- God bless you or "gesundheit" the German equivalent.... We don't wish someone a blessing when they burp, or cough. In my son-in-law's family, you are considered downright rude if you do not say "God bless you" when someone sneezes. There are several suggestions on how wishing God's blessing came about in sneezing: long ago, it was (1) believed that the soul is thrust from the body by a sneeze, so "God bless you" is a protective oath to safeguard your soul from Satan who is lurking near --- sort of a temporary shield over your soul.

(2) yet a second possible explanation considered a sneeze expelling demons or evil spirits in a person. So the "God bless you" is to protect re-entry of evil spirits just gotten rid of.

(3) A third idea is that "God bless you" was begun by Pope Gregory the Great (560-604 AD). He came into power just as the bubonic plague was killing off huge numbers of people in 590 AD, so columns of people would march through the streets chanting "Lord, have mercy" and if someone sneezed, they would say, "God bless you" in the hope that the person would not develop the plague.

If we followed their lead, now with our possibility of getting the flu, perhaps in addition to our refraining from shaking hands, our use of antiseptic hand wipes and our elbow bumps we should be saying "God bless you" to one and all in the hopes of driving out the flu.

This is just one way we consider the concept of "blessing". I've been so caught up in the receive-ing of "blessing" these last few weeks, that I wanted to share with you some thoughts on it. Do you know that the term and concept permeates the Bible -- Old and New Testament. I could have chosen any of several hundred passages on blessing.... Because in this NRSV translation alone, the word bless, blesses, blessedness, blessing, blessings, blessed occurs more than 700 times. The Lord said to Abram: "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and

make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” Blessings, in the Bible, come in many forms.

- Even before the story of Abraham, in the

story of the creation of the world, in Genesis 1, we are told that God created everything and then on the 7th day, God rested and hallowed and **blessed** that day of rest – the Sabbath.

- Just a bit later in the earliest stories of the

patriarchs of Judaism, we learn that brothers Jacob and Esau have a bitter fight over their father’s **blessing**; Jacob literally tricks Esau out of his **blessing**. A father’s blessing was considered to be the ultimate gift.

- The Psalmist tells us, “Those who have

clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive **blessing** from the Lord.” (240 “You bestow on him **blessings** forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence.” (21) “**Blessed** be the Lord for he has heard the sound of my pleadings.” (28) These are just a few of the citations about blessing in the Bible. Blessings are an important part of the Biblical narrative.

Today, we use the term “blessing” in a wide variety of ways – Pause for a moment and consider --- what are at least 3 ways you often consider the word “blessing” or “bless”. Some of you may be recalling God’s help, a religious act in which you have felt God’s “blessing”; some of you may be remembering a specific time – maybe a marriage or moving into a new home, when prayers were said requesting God’s blessing. Others may recall thinking, “it’s a blessing you came so quickly” – using the term as something to be glad or relieved about. A way of thanking someone --“bless you for speaking up for my child”; or, bless you, God bless” is often said when you’ve done a good deed for someone. You may have been referred to with the words, “you’re blessed with brains and good looks.” And then often we hear someone close a casual conversation with a stranger—on the phone or in a store with “Good bye, have a blessed day.” Especially in the south, one might say a simple, “Hello, how are you?” And the response may be, “I’m blessed.” Then, of course we say a blessing over meals before eating. Here in this worship service every Sunday we say words of blessing – words that acknowledge and lift up and give gratitude for a person’s life --- that’s a blessing on the person. We enable people to remember who they are in this way. All this is to remind us that this concept of blessing not only occurs in the Bible, but has permeated our daily lives in the world.

In 10 days, we will celebrate the national holiday of Thanksgiving. It is my hope that we as a grateful community of faith spend not just a day of thanksgiving, not just a week or 10 days, but a lifetime of thanksgiving, that we might cultivate the practice of giving thanks and recalling our blessings. When I think of the blessings that just seem to hover around each of us, I like the image of--- airplanes above an airport, in a holding pattern, stacked up with no place to land. Maybe you've experienced that --- being in that plane, and circling, and circling your destination but because of weather, of difficulties on the land, you cannot land. For most of us, that is similar to our blessings ---- we are encircled by our blessings, yet because of something going on with us, we just do not recognize them. The weather keeps the planes from landing. Our lack of attention, our busyness, our brusqueness, our anger, our focus on our feelings of the moment keep us from recognizing our blessings, from acknowledging and receiving them. At the airport, life on the ground changes once that plane that has been circling and circling has landed. People get off, go about their activities. So, too, life with us goes on..... even better when we allow our blessings to be recognized and received.

I fully realize that your lives are busy, and that once you leave this worship hour of focus on God and good, on blessings, other things will jump to the forefront of your attention, so I'm offering a simple, small way that might help you pause and recognize, acknowledge your blessings.... I'm handing out little bags of corn..... because we are in the harvest time of year, and in a couple weeks it will be thanksgiving, when we actually do pause for a couple hours and eat and meal and reflect on our gratitude. I'd love to see that extended into daily acts of gratitude – of recognizing our blessings... so I'm providing a physical, material, visual prop to help you in your daily remembering. Maybe you will keep these little kernels on your desk, maybe on your dining table, maybe in this baggie thrown up on the dashboard of your car or truck, and each time you glance at them, you'll pause and consider one of the blessings you have, one of the ways God has been acting for good in your life and name one of those for each kernel. I believe it changes us to acknowledge, recognize and receive. I'm asking you to "Count your blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done. When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed, When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, Count your many blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done. So, amid the conflict whether great or small, Do not be disheartened, God is over all; Count your many blessings, angels will attend, Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.

You know, this acknowledging –this remembering –giving thanks for blessings -- is a wonderful way to counter our own jealous heart of what someone else has, of conquering our own envious manner So perhaps you'll try every morning to get up and count your blessings it is a prayer that you just cannot complete, for there are truly so many blessings.....up there in that holding pattern circling, unrecognized or acknowledged by us the majority of our days.

Now, there is a second part of this consideration of the word blessing. God said to Abram, "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that **you will be a blessing**." We've been thinking about the blessings we have been given, now there is action required of us..... as God required it of Abram. God tells Abram, "Be a blessing." God is at work here. It is God who's doing the blessing, and only in response to God's blessing can Abram be a blessing to others. God calls, and Abram responds. God does not tell Abram, "be blessed, sit in your tent and drink your tea." God says, "be a blessing, pack your bags, forget your personal 5 year plan, follow me to a land I have prepared." While we are to recognize, acknowledge and thank God for our blessings, the call of God doesn't stop there. Abram was blessed, then hit the road. So, too, you and I need to BE a blessing. The opportunities just abound. Let me tell you of two which were reported to me just the last two days....

Bob Dixon wrote me an email saying, "Sometimes we don't realize what an impact our simple acts each day have on others. I took our 25 bags of donated canned goods to the Food Bank, but it was closed for Veterans Day. Not wanting to keep the food in the truck, I stopped by Hope House. The staff there told me no one has dropped off any food for several weeks and they were running very, very low on food. They presently have 23 children and 10 mothers who live there. Those 25 bags really did make a difference in the lives of others last week. I told the two staff ladies that I was thankful that our congregation could be a blessing to them that day."

Mothers and children right here in Fredericksburg had meals to eat because YOU made the time to purchase a few extra items of food.....YOU were a blessing.

Peg Jones also sent me an email this week when she heard I was preaching on blessings, saying, "don't forget to remind everyone that blessings work both ways -- we know our mission work team will be blessed by the people and work we do in Mississippi, but this congregation is also such a blessing..... the money raised to send us and support us, and give to help the work there was a generous blessing."

Perhaps as we are thinking about stewardship and how we are to use our resources and re-dedicate what we have been given by God in the work for others, we will reflect on our blessings --- all those circling above and landed, received into our hearts and lives, and we will commit to BE a blessing to another.