

Genesis 48:8-16

Blessings

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Sermon Series on Prayer

6.23.24

This is week 3 of our summer sermon series on prayer.

Each of the 11-week series we look at a person
in scripture who engages in a different kind or form of prayer.
11 weeks worth.

Not including unspoken moments of prayer,

silence like in our confession,

or meditative contemplation,

or the Holy Spirit's utterances on our behalf

as described in Romans 8:26,

when we can't pray as we ought

the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

Groaning in Greek being a word derived for

bursting under great pressure

something you can't keep in.

Our summer scriptures are looking at intended utterances,

mental word thoughts or spoken prayers to

express something in God's direction.

John Calvin, a founding father of Presbyterian, wrote the longest of
any section in his "Institute on Christian Religion" on prayer.

He says prayer is a communion with God,

where people seek to experience

that what they believed was not in vain.

(3.20.2 is the cite for this quotation, which I
found several places, but I can't exactly find it in the Institute.)

This definition says that in prayer we seek an experience of God,

one that confirms our beliefs and hopes about God.

Beliefs like, when we pray, we do not address an empty void.

That our utterances in God's direction matter,
at the very least to tune our hearts to God and others,
at the very best, to draw God's healing and hope
to the people and places
about which we pray.
to transcend our circumstance,
connecting with something beyond what we see,
to receive something more,
more strength, more peace, more love,
than we had to start.

This potential list of our beliefs and hopes about God
is confirmed when Abraham has an
interactive back and forth with God who engages him
the whole time. Week 1
and when Jacob has a wrestling match with God who
is real enough to give Jacob something firm to push
off and hold onto.

This week's scripture is different.

God is not on the scene as a dialogue or wrestling partner.
Yet God is mentioned 5 times in 8 verses,
as Jacob, called Israel throughout this passage,
Pastor Scott's sermon last week
drew from the scripture where
Jacob is renamed Israel,
prepares a blessing for the next generations of his
family.

Judy Newman, a professor and author of
a book on Ancient Israel prayer practices,

says that the blessing is the only form of prayer
that humans and God share. (from Podcast)

<https://www.biblicaltimemachine.com/listen-to-episodes/b24fssktgs7yzxz-scarm-bxjxm-jr9y7-khjbb-zn9dd-w9jgd-lc4nj-w8mhr-x6662-en45b-6crbr-cw5tr-ye69n-cbkng-28la6-gnmp2>

God blesses people, as we have seen in Abraham's story, and Jacob's.

People bless God, Baruch Ata Adonai,

Or the beginning of Psalm 34 as one verse among many,

"I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall
Continually be in my mouth."

And it is also the case in scripture that people bless other people,
and that they do so with their hands.

In families, like Isaac to Jacob and Esau,

Jacob to Joseph and his sons Ephraim and Manasseh,
each time with hands placed upon heads

In worship communities, Aaron blesses the people with
words given by God, lifting his hands towards the people.

Jesus places his hands upon children to pray over them.

There is a middle English word that goes with giving a blessing that we
sometimes still use today, and that is the word bestow.

Which derives from the word stow,

to place, to put something carefully in a good position.

A blessing is a real, tangible gift of good words and hope that you can
place upon a person.

According to Presbyterian worship guides,

I raise my hands at the benediction to symbolize

God's power and to indicate that if I could,

I would be placing my hands on all of your heads.

It is a posture of sharing and passing along,

not storing up God's blessings and keeping things for oneself alone.

And very much like Jacob, the blessings one has to share often come
from moments of God's presence that were wholly unearned.

Jacob conspires with his mother Rebecca to steal his
Brother Esau's blessing from his father Isaac,
Esau is angry enough to kill so Jacob flees,
and that very night, while dreaming of angels on a ladder,
Jacob hears God say,

"I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac....Know
that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to
this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

That blessing was at the beginning of Jacob's story.

Today's blessing is at the end.

Jacob is reunited with Joseph and is with Joseph's sons
-we hear so much of Jacob's losses in what he says to Joseph,
"I did not expect to see your face, and here God has let me see your children also."
and he bestows upon them a blessing in 4 parts.

1 part past

2 parts lived experience

1 part future

Past: "The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked,

That is the intersection of inherited faith from family and community

Lived experience 1 ordinary days:

the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day
lived experience of God as guide and giver like a shepherd

Lived experience 2 valleys and pits

the angel who has redeemed me from all harm,
lived experience of God as a redeemer and rescuer

Future: bless the boys, and in them let my name be perpetuated and the name of
my ancestors Abraham and Isaac, and let them grow into a multitude on the earth."
future hope for family and generations

Jacob is planting himself in the middle of God's ongoing story
with this blessing,
 arms outstretched towards the boys a physical symbol of this,
 Jacob is in a line of blessing from those who came before,
 his life story became a part of it,
 and it will continue when he is gone from this earth.

From what experiences of God in your story would you draw a 4-fold blessing:
 The inherited faith of family or community
 God as guiding shepherd of your life
 God as redeemer and rescuer,
 Hopes for the future of your faith family and community.

The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says one of the gifts of blessing
is that we see something from a divine perspective.

 We participate in God's initiative.

She says we can't bless something that we view as an object,
 or only see as a supporting player in our story,
 to bless someone means to acknowledge
 that they are a subject that God loves,
 and while blessing connects us to
 whomever we bless,
 it also helps us to see them more
 whole as less a part of us.

Here is a story Barbara Brown Taylor shares for your consideration in your
summer travels:

The next time you are at the airport, try blessing the people sitting at the departure
gate with you. Every one of them is dealing with something significant. See that
mother trying to contain her explosive two-year-old Even if you cannot know for
sure what is going on with them, you can still give a care. They are on their way
somewhere, the same way you are. They are between places too, with no more
certainty than you about what will happen at the other end. Pronounce a blessing

and pay attention to what happens in the air between you and that other person, all those other people.

(Better to Buy *An Altar in the World* and read her words on blessing, but they are also here

https://www.oprah.com/spirit/an-altar-in-the-world-excerpt-barbara-brown-taylor_1/all)

If you can, I suggest you use your hands to do so,
as a reminder that what you have to give in blessing
does not come from you, but also does not stop with you.

This month it seems that everyone driving in McLean
is either going 15 miles per hour under the speed limit
or recklessly passing me on a no-passing 2-lane road
like Old Dominion or Georgetown Pike.

I am aware that this is confirmation bias,
that once I thought it was like this,
I saw it that way more and more.
Particularly in June when school was ending
and I was driving everywhere.

So this week I've been trying a four-part blessing,
hand still on steering wheel for safety,
but outstretched to a person in a car, and saying a version of,
the God of my family and church,
who walks with me everyday
and rescues from all the pits and valleys,
goes with you wherever you are headed now and forever.

Try it and tell me if the air between you and that other person
doesn't begin to feel different.

Strangers in airports, anonymous drivers,
children and grandchildren, neighbors, colleagues,
church friends, God,
so many opportunities for blessing,
as Kate Bowler, a blessing expert says,

for the strange and vital work of noticing what is true about
God and ourselves, for blessing the world as it is and
as it should be.