

In the first book of the Bible, God tells Abram to go to a new place, leave his family behind, and set up the beginnings of many nations. He'll go, God says, with God's blessing. But God doesn't bless Abram so that he'll be a conqueror or a rule maker or a king. God blesses Abram "so that he will be a blessing." There's a whole lot of story between Abram and us, but I wonder if he'd lived out that blessing to be a blessing if we'd've needed any of the intervening stories to guide us. But of course, the story played out differently. From Hagar and Ishmael abandoned to the desert to the ethnic cleansing of the book of Joshua to the prophets advocating for the oppressed to Christ on the cross, over and over our stories swing between reminders to love our neighbors and our failures to do so. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

I wonder how different the Bible, how different History would've turned out if Abram and all his descendants including us, I wonder how different everything'd be if we lived with that as our primary tenet: we are blessed so that we will be a blessing. Would we have road rage? Fearful wars? Racism, misogyny, homophobia? If we really lived with the purpose of being a blessing to all we encounter, our lives would be different and likely much more pleasant. And maybe, just maybe, in place of all the religious conflicts, territorial claims bolstered by gods, genocides pitting one faith against another, maybe those would've turned out different, too, if they even happened at all. Really, if every one of our ancestors, familial and ecclesial, if every one of 'em lived to be a blessing best they could, things would be different. It's the kind of paradigm shift that makes an alternate history almost unimaginable.

And while we can't change history, we can change how we live our piece of it. It's incredible to imagine what changes if being a blessing becomes our guiding principle for every interaction, every choice, every purchase, every law passed, every protest gathered, every correction made, every side chosen, every human loved and respected and valued. I know our world makes being a blessing hard enough and being a blessing in all things even harder. But something being hard is no excuse not to try. We choose to do it because -- though it is hard -- it's worth it for those we encounter and for the depth, integrity, and faithfulness of our own souls.

Now, part of what makes this hard is that we can't count on others to apply the same impulse. I can try to be a blessing all I like, but what do I do when someone else decides being a blessing is naive, dumb, unmanly, or even prime for manipulation? What do I do? I be a blessing. It's really not that complicated. Just be a blessing. If only it were so easy. Of course, where it gets complicated's nothing new. The Bible's chock-full of stories where God gives directions, we agree to the terms, and then we go right out and mess it all up. That's a tale as old as Eden, Abram, Moses, and so many ancient judges and kings. It's the recurring trope of humanity: in spite of our best efforts and even our greatest advancements, we keep falling short of blessing each other.

And when we do fall short, that's when we get prophets, prophets whose main job isn't to tell the future, though their warnings often do come to fruition. The prophets remind those who wield the marionette strings of power that being a blessing is God's purpose for us, not maximizing the other kind of profit or accumulating power or hurting certain people. The wealthy, the abusers, the oppressors were lambasted by prophets back then, and we call their truth-telling "the Word of God." It wasn't easy for them, either. There's all kinds of references to how they suffered for speaking the truth and reminding the powerful to quit taking advantage of their power and start being a blessing again. They foretold the downfall of their nations not because they had some special ability to see the future but because they knew the heart of a society is rooted in how it treats its most vulnerable people, and rotten roots cannot keep even the most towering forests standing.

In a tragic sense, it's fascinating how predictably we repeat those old tropes, how relevant the old warnings remain, how reliably the old rot returns and empires fall for the same old reasons. At its root, it's a

particular kind of sin rotting from the inside, a kind of sin that says being a blessing wasn't really God's intent for us after all. If we can save money, say, we should cut public health services, abandon each other to the mercies of GoFundMe drives, demonize the other. Nevermind the direct and predictable connections between those cuts and, say, screw worm eradication south of our border or ebola management on another continent. But of course, while saving money in those arenas is so "necessary," we've somehow got plenty to dump into machines of war and efforts to cleanse our nation of apparent impurities.

If someone like Jeremiah arrived on our soil and began speaking to the halls of power as he did in his day, he'd be discounted as a partisan shill for suggesting that maybe we ought to care for each other instead of enriching ourselves and following mischaracterized narratives about God. He'd likely be charged with defamation, get his apartment raided, face deportation and maybe even imprisonment simply for having the courage to speak the truth that our purpose is not whatever the powerful've decided to get up to that particular day; our purpose is to be a blessing.

I wonder, if we were to go through every piece of legislation in our history, every speech given, every vote cast, I wonder how many approached the issues at hand with being a blessing in mind. I also wonder how many blessings we've allotted to those holding the marionette strings compared to those strung up at their behest. Now, one group or several groups receiving blessings doesn't negate the need others have to receive blessings, too, but perspective and context matter. The marionette string holders need blessings, too, of course they do, just not the same kind. Some people need blessings in the form of food or housing or help with addiction. Some need blessings in the form of mental health care after returning from war, support in retirement, better education, doctors and teachers and communities that love people for who they are, places people can feel safe, places people can show their love out in the open. Some need blessings that meet physical needs, but others need blessings of a different kind, the blessings of truth, proportionality, and the old prophets' still-relevant warnings. It's not a condemnation of the person to say someone needs to change; that kind of correction can be a blessing, too, and reflects a deep show of respect in the attempt to stand between another person's misguided priorities and those they'll harm -- a show of respect blessing both by protecting the one from harm and protecting the other from doing harm.

That never-ending refrain of humanity, in some ways it's disheartening. Why do we still need the words of the prophets? Or to put it differently, what does that refrain say about our hope that things can get better? At the very least, it means we've got our work cut out for us, but from Abram to Matthew to us, our calling remains the same: to be a blessing. To live among foreigners, to eat with sinners, to welcome the agents of the empire to our table should they decide to join us, all that's part of being a blessing. And so is telling all those people the truth. The people being hunted and killed need one set of blessings from folks like us, and the people doing the hunting need a different set of blessings. Still blessings, mind you, but a different kind. My hope remains because this is something we can do, with God's help. It's hard, but we can do this. We can be blessings, historical patterns be damned, we can be the blessings people need, and we can adapt to different and changing needs with different and changing blessings.

Or, to use Jesus' language, "those who are well have no need of a physician." Far as I can see in my own failed attempts at being a blessing, what's needed most is a reminder of what this religion so many claim to represent is about: you are blessed *so that you will be a blessing*. Not a blessing to some, or just the ones you like, or only the ones you think deserve it, but a blessing to all. Jesus also quotes one of those old prophets when he says God desires mercy not sacrifice. Perhaps we should remember that mercy as we try to be blessings ourselves. Perhaps we should remember mercy when our nation has become so willing to sacrifice human beings to the triple gods of war, the accumulation of power, and a bulging stock market. Perhaps assigning other people as sacrifices isn't what God had in mind when Abram was sent to start something new defined by mercy

and blessing. And perhaps we need to take a look at our roots, repair what's rotten, and define every step, every statement, every decision by that ancient calling. We are blessed. So, hard as it is, we must be a blessing.