

EPIPHANY 6C 2025
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
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Okay. Time for a show of hands. How many of you came here this morning expecting the first words of scripture you hear to be a curse?

Of all the prophets, major and minor, Jeremiah seems to win the prize of being the least happy of the whole lot. He has no choice, it seems, but to do and say what God tells him. But God doesn't say "don't worry, be happy" while he does it. At least, the "be happy" part is missing from the memo.

To get a sense of the context of today's first lesson, I read again the chapters that precede it. You might want to try it. Start with Jeremiah 1 and read through chapter 17. If you're battling insomnia, at least then you would know why you lie awake at night.

Israel is in trouble as a consequence of their straying away from God's calling. Jeremiah is in trouble, too, because he speaks truth in the face of some of the aforesaid "don't worry, be happy" false prophets. It's a familiar theme, and Jeremiah is not alone. Legend has it that the first prophet named Isaiah was martyred by being sawn in half. And, no, that is not where we get Second and Third Isaiahs.

Jesus knows all this, and we hear him commenting on that in today's Gospel. Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" is a counterpart to Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount." Many of the same themes apply, but Luke is more personal in his telling. Jesus speaks to his disciples, whom Luke has just named, and he wants to let them know what it means to be a disciple of the Son of Man.

Take a moment now and consider something, be it a relationship or a personal attribute, that you consider a blessing. Then, consider again how many in our culture identify blessings. My mother had a trivet hanging above the kitchen sink that said something to the effect of "look at all around you and see how God has been good to us." I'm not sure if she dared look at that when the stove went out on Thanksgiving, but at some time that cliché may have had a ring of truth about it.

I don't know if Mom thought about that trivet and all the stuff accumulated in their house, or if there was a broader understanding of blessing. We never talked about it. But that question is one we need to consider on a regular basis as we consider how (or if) the blessings we claim are truly blessings. In other words, are they of God or not?

When God called Abram to leave his homeland in a part of Mesopotamia, now in southern Iraq bordering the Persian Gulf, God promised Abram that he would become a great nation, with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. The only thing Abram had to do at that moment was to trust that promise, and set out to a place God would show him once he got there.

God promised a blessing. But it's more than that. The blessing is in its own way to become a blessing to everyone and everything. Blessed to be a blessing, you might say. But it's more than a feeling, more than an emotional high. It's a calling that gives meaning to our lives.

So along with considering the meaning of blessing, today's Gospel also asks us to consider our definition of life. How we measure our blessings reveals how we consider the meaning of our lives. If our blessings are defined as things we say we own, such as a house, a car, or other belongings, we have to admit that at times these blessings seem more like curses. The roof starts leaking, a tire goes flat, the engine won't start. The stove won't heat, but the refrigerator seems to have taken over that job.

Put that reversal in today's context. "Blessed are you who are poor." "Blessed are you who are hungry." "Blessed are you when others hate you." You might avoid some of that by reading ahead. You will become rich. You will be fed. They did that to the prophets, too, even as they quote the same prophets to speak against you. While Luke's Gospel helps us remember that God shows favor to the poor, sometimes I think Luke also tries to tell us that God takes a particular delight in irony.

Consider what you think of as your greatest strength. Now consider how that same strength could possibly be a detriment to your life. The same holds true for a weakness, even a fear. Understanding our weakness, our fears, and naming them, can help us use those same things as ways of engaging in ministry to others, helping us do the work that goes all the way back to Abram. Our weakness can be the very thing that becomes a blessing, reaching out to be a blessing to others who still have difficulty naming their weaknesses or facing their fears.

And so, I pose this to you today. Consider the weakness, the possible curse we've felt after economic difficulty, a pandemic, and cultural turning away from anything mystical or transcendent, and how we talk about life in those conditions. Now, find ways to reach out to those who seem trapped by the same conditions, which are mostly out of any of our abilities to control them.

Don't try to fix them, or anyone. Instead, see in them a way to do ministry by reaching out for understanding between those whose ability to understand seems to be overwhelmed by their reality. Form relationships, and let them grow. Let those curses become blessings, and the fruit of those blessings be both soul nourishing and seed-producing for future growth. You might find greater blessings than you ever considered, and that those blessings you once held dear are not nearly as meaningful as you once thought.

Our need for, our desire for blessing leaves a door open for anything to step in and claim that identity. What we might think of as blessing might actually reveal itself to be a curse. It works both ways. What might now seem like a curse can turn into a blessing beyond our wildest dreams.

There's one way to tell which is which. Take some time to discern the presence of God in it all. If God is there, we are blessed. But if we embrace what is not of God, we curse ourselves, and possibly identify a false god whom we really worship. God, as the prophets keep reminding us, has an eternity to let us stew in that until we discover where our true blessings can be found.

I realize that I may have just given a justification for the Roman doctrine of purgatory. But I don't think God is hanging in the wings, waiting until we die, to put us in time out until we learn how to behave. The incarnation of Christ is our example of how our ideas of heaven, and hell, are realized in our own time and place. So, we might consider which of those are the blessings we desire. Which one we truly receive is the one we give to others. Because the one we truly worship is named not just by what we have received, but mainly by what we give to those around us.