

What Counts as a Blessing?

I Samuel 1:1-20

Mark 13:1-8

“The Lord kills and he brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and he raises up.”

What counts as a blessing on this Thursday next as we gather together? Some will be counting milestone blessings this year: a marriage begun, a child born, a diploma earned, a job landed, a house bought, a retirement announced. Others will count the blessings of general well-being: health, friendship, freedom, economic security, family. Still others will count the simple blessings: the fireplace crackling, a dog's wet nose on your ankle, the smell of sage filling the house, a grandchild sleeping in your arms, geese going down the dark sky.

"Every way I've tried to express this through the years sounds lunatic," Roxanne Slade says in Reynolds Price's novel of the same name, "so I've told nobody but I'll try again here. What I slowly felt sitting there [on the bank of the river]...was a wide sense of privilege. Wide and tall with no roof on it and no side walls. When I asked my mind to name the privilege--what was I being given?--the answer that came was something as plain as *Being alive here now this moment*. When that seemed common and insufficient, I asked again and then understood that *Life, in the world I occupy, is an adequate blessing--whatever pain may bear down on me from the skies or elsewhere*."

The pain that did bear down on Roxanne Slade, page after page, was unrelenting: a first love drowned that very afternoon in the river on whose bank she now sat in gratitude; a husband unfaithful from the beginning; a family beset with illness and addiction; her own paralyzing depression. Nevertheless, she will conclude in retrospect as she did in prospect, that life is an adequate blessing. For each of us to conclude the same depends, in large part, on what counts as a blessing.

When the Hebrew people asked their minds to name the wide sense of privilege which had chosen them and accompanied them, upheld them and governed them, the name of this privilege was *barak* in Hebrew: the blessing of Yahweh. To be sure, these blessed characters often had power and wealth, good looks and success on the surface. King David, for instance. But beneath the surface of their blessed lives are stories of tragedy and brokenness, of disappointment and astounding grief, of pain bearing down from the skies. A son conceived in adultery dies in infancy; another son turns traitor and is killed by David's own men. Or take Hannah, for another instance. Barren, taunted by her husband's fertile wife, berated by Eli as she pours her heart out to God and yet chosen of God to bear the child whose birth would begin to reverse the fortunes of God's people.

What, then, from the perspective of the biblical witness, counts as a blessing in the world we occupy if it is more than meets the eye? In the first place, to be blessed is to be a person with whom God abides. When the Bible says of a person, "God is with him...God is with her," it is the same as saying that person has been blessed. The catch, of course, is that God's presence guarantees only one thing in life: no matter the pain that bears down on you, God will be with you, will accompany you *here now in this moment*. Or as Rabbi Harold Kushner puts it, "...you're going to find yourself in the darkness, you're going to find yourself in the 'valley of the shadow.' You will feel abandoned, but you're never abandoned. That's where you will discover the reality of God." Kushner goes on to say that "people who have been hurt by life get stuck in the 'valley of the shadow,' and they don't know how to find their way out. And that's the role of God. The role of God is not to explain and not to justify, but...to find people when they are living in darkness, [and] take them by the hand."

Hannah surely was stuck in the valley of the shadow with a husband who thought he was more than ten sons to her, with his fertile wife who provoked her and with their children. Who wouldn't be stuck? Still, Hannah knows herself as accompanied by a God to whom she may speak and with whom she may bargain. In the valley of the shadow and deeply distressed, Hannah prays to the Lord and weeps bitterly. Kushner says the most important word in the psalm we all know by heart is the word "through": Hannah walked *through* the valley of the shadow because the Lord was with her. It counts as a blessing that God accompanies us.

Then, in the second place, in Scripture human prospering counts as a blessing, but prospering in what sense?

We presume and much of the Old Testament confirms a direct correlation between blessing and prosperity, riches, success—on the surface. Beneath the surface, however, the characters who live abundantly are the characters who live the life given them by God to live, who will God’s will, who present themselves as a thank offering to God. In the depth of her despair, Hannah promises the child she is incapable of conceiving to God’s service, and without prideful words or arrogance, asks only to find favor in the Lord’s sight. She is the one character who prospers in this story.

“Fit as I’d always been to be pleased by the smallest good luck, the briefest meeting or an unblemished leaf that fell to my lap from any tree,” Roxanne Slade says, “something at the heart of my seeing...seemed to show me the point of my life hereafter. I would be a person who worked at proving, to however few doubters through the hardest of times or easy days, that the actual world is worth all your strength. Never hold back a cent of all you own and bear inside you” she says, “spend it all, die empty-handed.” To be sure, the world we occupy drives us, for the sake of prosperity or success or acclaim, to become what we are not in order to be tangibly blessed. But the prospering that counts as a blessing is a prospering in proportion to the life you give away rather than as a reflection of the life you accumulate.

Then in the third place, what counts as a blessing is the gift of faith, the gift of a great trust in God’s trustworthiness. Such trust issues not from what the world counts as evidence. “We never believe ‘on account of’, never ‘because of’; we awake to faith,” Karl Barth says, “in spite of everything.” The gift of faith is a blessing that permits us “to rely on God as regards ourselves and also as regards what moves us on behalf of...the whole of humanity; it is concerned with the whole of living and the whole of dying.” Therefore, no matter our circumstances, faith is a blessing that enables us to live in a large trust--wide and tall with no roof on it or side walls...in spite of the pain which bears down.

Blessed by her trust in God’s trustworthiness, Hannah weans the child she thought she would never have, goes up to the house of the Lord at Shiloh and, as she put it, “lends him to the Lord; as long as he lives he is given to the Lord.” Returning home childless, she sings of the God whose promises she trusts completely in spite of everything: “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the weak are clothed in strength. Those once full now labor for bread, those who hungered now are well fed. The childless woman has borne sevenfold, while the mother of many is forlorn. God destroys and brings to life, casts down and raises up; gives wealth or takes it away, humbles and dignifies.” To trust such a God in spite of everything is to be greatly blessed.

“With all the pain and waste I’ve known in my own life and the lives that touched mine,” Roxanne Slade concludes toward the end of her ninety some years, “--not to mention the horrors of this whole century, one slow bloodbath—I’ve never been able to shake that knowledge that came with my childhood...However hard I’ve slashed away in my bad times at what I knew, I haven’t succeeded in felling the trust of that certainty that came into the world with me...If I lie in my own bed in the dark and look straight up at nothing at all beyond the ceiling, I can almost always start to feel again that calm first fact from my childhood. And then the whole great hoop of whatever *is*, gorgeous or dreadful as it may be, starts turning in the night sky above me bearing everything that has ever been or is” into the love from which it came. [T]he only axle which matters is turning with all its weight of trees and waterfalls, plagues and fire storms, souls in torment and me in some surviving shape no doubt huddled out toward its rim holding nothing in hand but my strong memories and the hope to keep breathing as long as I know my family’s names and can smile when they touch me.”

But on this Thursday next, once the dishes are done, the children in bed, the fire slowly dying and our bodies ready for sleep, if we ask our minds one final time to name the privilege by which we know we are accompanied and directed, are upheld and enabled to live in a great trust, the name is Jesus Christ. To follow him is to walk through the valley of the shadow, whatever pain may bear down from the skies, as those who are not alone but accompanied. To know him is to behold the person we were created to be *here now in the moment*, and so to spend our life, spend it all, dying empty-handed. To love him is to live and die in a great trust that God’s redemptive purposes will triumph in spite of everything.

What counts as a blessing? On this Thursday next, may the love to whom we belong in life and in death be an adequate blessing.