

## **When the curse is a blessing**

Mark 13:1-8

November 15, 2015

Sometimes life is sweet ...

When your puppy jumps up on the bed and licks you in the face.

When your two-and-a-half year old granddaughter FaceTimes you.

In the midst of the silence, the holy silence, when nothing needs to be said, because in that moment, nothing needs to be said.

Sometimes life is bitter ...

When a young pregnant pastor's wife is shot and killed during a robbery.

When 129 people are senselessly killed by terrorists.

When you lose your job.

Sometimes you feel blessed ...

Hiking the hills and glens of Backbone State Park on a beautiful fall day with Toby at your side.

Silently watching the faces, the faces of your friends gathered around you, realizing how blessed you are to have known these people, how blessed you are to have been known by them.

Sometimes you feel blessed just waking up, waking up to a new day, just being alive in a new day brimming with possibilities.

Sometimes you feel cursed ...

When calamity seems to follow calamity: a broken down car, a broken down body, an unexpected death, an unexpected diagnosis.

When all around you faith, hope, and love seem entirely overmatched against hatred and violence and ignorance.

Sometimes you feel cursed just waking up, waking up to another day, one more day you are not at all ready to face.

Our lives are a mix of sweet and bitter, blessing and curse. Our hope is, our only hope is, that, on balance, there is more sweet than bitter, that the blessing will outweigh the curse. This is our only hope ... until we come into the sanctuary and our eyes fall on the cross.

Do you see the cross? This instrument of torture and death? This tool used by a pitiless empire to instill fear and stifle rebellion? This curse laid on the bodies and souls of the oppressed? When Jesus is hung on that cross, the curse becomes a blessing.

This is our faith, that God turns mourning into dancing, tears into joy, curse into blessing. We live in the same world, subject to the same perils and plagues as every other human being, but we see it all from a different perspective. We see it all from the perspective of the cross, the cross that shows us what God does with the curse!

And this has been true from the beginning. The first few chapters of Genesis tell the story of this world and our place in it. The story reminds us that all God makes is beautiful and good, that we are beautiful and good, and that we are made to live in harmony with God, with each other, and with all of creation.

But the story also reminds us that we turn our backs to God, go our own way, follow our own rules, despoiling the beauty and destroying the harmony. And, for that, we are cursed. This is no particular curse, on this person or that person, for this time or that time, but a general curse that is laid on all people for all time. But listen again, look again, and see how even the curse is a blessing.

*Because of what you have done, the ground will be under a curse. You will have to work hard all your life to make it produce enough food for you. It will produce weeds and thorns, and you will have to eat wild plants. You will have to work hard and sweat ...*

The curse is work, hard work, hard work just to survive. Life will not be easy. Survival will not be easy. Just living day by day will require from you an enormous effort of body and mind.

But that effort makes us stronger and wiser and better. That work makes us who we are. Work, hard work, is a blessing -- the flint against which we are sharpened, the challenge to which we must rise. Hard work gives our lives purpose. It gives our lives meaning. It develops our imagination and our industry and our creativity. It makes us more like God. The curse is a blessing.

*And God said to the woman, "I will increase your trouble in pregnancy and your pain in giving birth."*

The curse is pain, pain and struggle and peril in childbirth. The very act most necessary to our survival as a human race will be fraught with struggle and anguish and danger.

But we are talking about birthing a child, about bringing a new life into the world! The way may be hard, but we choose it, because it is not a burden, but a joy. And here we are shown not at our worst, but at our best, the literal embodiment of unselfishness, giving our selves for the sake of another. The curse is a blessing.

*I will make you and the woman hate each other; her offspring and yours will always be enemies.*

The curse is enmity. We have an enemy who never leaves us alone. Call this enemy what you will -- a snake, a devil, the Accuser, the powers of this world, sin -- but none of us are free from its temptations and its threats. We are cursed not only by threats to our well-being that come from outside us, but also that come from inside us. Who will rescue us from this plague that leads us to betray not only God, but our own selves too?

We are back to the cross, to the moment our enemy was poised to celebrate his greatest triumph, but this was the moment Jesus Christ, one of us, a human being like us, won the victory. The struggle against sin exposes our frailty. The struggle against sin leaves us at God's mercy. The struggle against sin drives us to Jesus. The curse is a blessing.

The curse is a blessing. This has been true from the beginning and it is true now. Countries will fight each other, there will be earthquakes everywhere, there will be famines. This is how it is. This is the curse, but Jesus tells his disciples and us: "Don't be troubled!"

Don't be troubled, because the pain, the anguish, the trouble, the peril do not mean the end has come. Doom is not on the horizon. "These things are like the first pains of childbirth." A new world is on the horizon! The suffering we must endure, each of us and all of us, is not a seed of despair, but a seed of hope. The curse is a blessing.

Sometimes life is sweet, sometimes bitter. Sometimes we feel blessed, sometimes cursed. But in the eyes of faith, all of it brings hope, because all of it, the sweetness and the bitterness, the blessing and the curse, is part of the still unfolding story of God, a story that is not yet ended, and, in fact, will not have an end, but a story that will bring us one day, each of us and all of us, to the end God has in mind for us, an end which is not curse, but blessing, and which is really our beginning.