

Epiphany 5, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Yesterday

my sister-in-law posted a video on YouTube.

It was my nephew dancing in response to the news that he has a stem cell donor,
and the music he is dancing to is

“Happy” from the Despicable Me 2 soundtrack.

I don't think

that Lockey is going to receive any awards for his dancing.

But he's full of that joyful silliness

that we so associate with the word “happy.”

“Happy are they who fear the Lord,”

our psalm today begins.

“Happy are they who fear the Lord.”

And that, I suspect,

is one of the hardest verses in the bible for us to understand.

Because when we hear that word happy,

all sorts of things jump into our minds,

that silly joy that seven year olds so often display,

the feeling we might have had on our wedding day,

and of course, the words we learned from the Declaration of Independence, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

But the problem is

that we don't always

feel happy.

And if people who fear God, who honor God,

who as the psalm puts it,

who delight in his commandments,

who do their best to follow God,

are supposed to be happy,

where does that leave us

when we don't feel happy?

When life is a struggle?

When we feel sad?

What do we do as Christians

if we don't feel happy?

It's a really difficult
and a really important
question.

And there are two parts to the answer.
One is
to ask, what does the word happy mean?
And the other
what does the psalm actually say?

So first, what does happy really mean?

As Americans,
our ideas of happiness
are shaped by that phrase from the the Declaration of Independence,
“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by
their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit
of Happiness.”

Yesterday
I tried to do some research on what “the pursuit of happiness” originally meant.
Most of the answers basically said
that we all have a right to try to be happy.
But there was one much more interesting article.

It began by saying
that it's pretty much accepted
that when Thomas Jefferson drafted these words,
he was borrowing from the seventeenth century philosopher John Locke,
who wrote in his “two Treatises on Government”
that governments are instituted to secure people's rights to “life, liberty, and property.”

Jefferson dropped the word property
and put in its place
“the pursuit of happiness.”
And many people think of it
as his own innovation.

But if you read more widely in the work of John Locke,
you discover that in another essay that he called “Concerning Human Understanding”
he argued that “The necessity of pursuing happiness [is] the foundation of liberty.”

And he went on to explain that happiness in this case is not so much about individuals getting their desires, but the pursuit of the greatest good for all, something that involved courage, moderation, and justice.

So the pursuit of happiness in the Declaration of Independence had more to do with how we live than how we feel, living rightly, justly, courageously.

And that echoes the meaning of the original Hebrew word here which doesn't just mean happy as we ordinarily think of it, but is something closer to "blessed."

"Blessed are they who fear the Lord."

And the psalm then goes on to talk about what it means to happily fear God, to blessedly delight in his commandments.

And so now we come to our second question. What does the psalm actually say?

And to do that we need to look - and I suspect you're all going to groan, because this is kind of like middle school English - but we need to look at the tenses of the verbs used.

Verses 2, 3, and 6, are in the future tense. They are the promise of God.

Verses 4, 5 and 9 are in the present.

They are the commands, the advice on how to live. And verses 1, 7 and 8 make the connection between it all.

So what we have here is a promise of what will happen in the future

based on the decisions we make now.

Let's begin
with the future promises.

Their descendants will be mighty in the land; *
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches will be in their house, *
and their righteousness will last for ever.
For they will never be shaken; *
the righteous will be kept in everlasting remembrance.

Does any of that sound familiar?

Remember
when God called Abraham
back in Genesis chapter 12.

God "said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"

And then, when Abram finally arrived in the promised land, God said to him, 'Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northwards and southwards and eastwards and westwards; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring for ever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.'

This is what it meant to be blessed in the Old Testament.

To have descendants
who would carry your name
so that you would not be forgotten,
to have land
to grow crops and flocks.
And of course, if you had these things,
people would recognize
that you had been blessed -
just as we today
look back at Abraham
and see that God
blessed him.

That's what blessing is. That's what happiness is.

And then
But how do you get there?

That's where the present comes in.
It's the definition
of a happy, a virtuous
life.

“Light shines in the darkness for the upright;
the righteous are merciful and full of compassion.
It is good for them to be generous in lending
and to manage their affairs with justice.
They have given freely to the poor,
and their righteousness stands fast for ever;
they will hold up their head with honor.”

Those who are righteous, those who are virtuous,
those who are blessed
are those who honor God.
And they do it
by being merciful
and compassionate.
They do it by being generous,
generous in their lending,
generous in their giving.
In everything they do, they seek to do justice,
to give what is fair and right and good - as a minimum -
and to give more than that.
They have nothing
to be ashamed of.
They err on the side
of generosity.

And the result, the result of all this
is blessing.
Not necessarily the material sort,
but the blessing, the happiness
of being secure in God.

That's what verses seven and eight are about.
“They will not be afraid of any evil rumors;
their heart is right;
they put their trust in the Lord.

Their heart is established and will not shrink,
until they see their desire upon their enemies.”

Because they have chosen
to trust in God,
they have chosen
to live virtuously,
they have chosen
to live lives that are about both blessing
and being blessed.

And people will recognize that. That’s what verse ten is about.
People will see their blessing,
and yes, some will be resentful and angry.
But that doesn’t block
God’s blessing.

And this life of blessing,
this life of blessing and being blessed
is echoed in our gospel today. It’s from the Sermon on the Mount, those words of Jesus that
begin with the Beatitudes,
begin by speaking about blessing.
And in today’s reading from that sermon
we hear Jesus’ words,
“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp
puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the
same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give
glory to your Father in heaven.”

Blessing
and being blessed.

In this week’s Sunday review section of the New York Times,
there’s an op ed column
about Pope Francis.
Apparently
someone made a life size statue of him
of chocolate.
And the writer says,
“Francis has recognized and taken advantage of the fact that people of all stripes — liberals,
conservatives — are as hungry for saints as they are for, well, chocolate. They may not have
much patience for the vocabulary of shame and the fustiest definitions of sin, but they want

examples of goodness and calls to grace, and they'll respond eagerly to the ones that don't come with exclusionary rules and harping about penance."

Our world is hungry for saints.
Our world is hungry for blessing.
And this psalm
invites us
to be visible expressions of the blessing of God,
blessing
and being blessed.
Maybe even
happy.