

**“Blessing God”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
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It was about 48 years ago, on April 8, 1966, that Time Magazine ran a cover story which simply asked the question “Is God Dead?”. This cover story, these words, this question was written in red letters upon a dark, black background. The cover, itself, was as dark and foreboding as the question, and the question was partly in response to the growing secular nature of American society. It was partly in response to modern science which had eliminated the need for religion to explain the natural world, and it was partly in response to the Death of God movement. The Death of God movement was made up of theologians who had been trying to construct a theology without God. These theologians cited the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, and wrote in their book, which was called *Toward A Hidden God*, that Nietzsche’s thesis was that “striving, self-centered mankind had killed God”, and that settled that. The current Death of God group believes that God is, indeed, absolutely dead but proposes to carry on and write a theology without Theos, without God.

Now, a few years prior to this Time Magazine cover, in 1961, perhaps the most prominent Death of God Theologian, Gabriel Vahanian, wrote a book simply called *The Death of God* in which he argued that modern secular culture had lost all sense of the sacred, that modern secular culture lacked any sacramental meaning, that there was no transcendental purpose or sense of providence in our world any longer. There was no sense that God intervened in the world any longer, and he concluded that a transformed post-Christian and post-modern culture was needed to create a renewed experience of God.

Now, I suspect that this Death of God sensibility in our culture lives on today because, in many ways, we are more secular than ever and, even though we don’t have groups of theologians working on this idea (as far as I know), and even though we don’t have dark, foreboding magazine covers to shock us and our senses, and even though modern science continues to unveil the mysteries of creation and our universe, talking about the death of God is now passé. It is no longer fashionable, it is out of style, and it is not “hip” to talk about the death of God. In this reality that it is no longer “hip” to talk about God, whether living or dead, is perhaps the key to rediscovering the living God in our lives. That is to say, if we, in our day-to-day lives begin to again make God talk central, in all that we do, can we resuscitate the notion and the presence of God in our lives?

To explore this idea about whether or not talking more about God can resuscitate the consciousness of God in our culture, I want to take a look at the concept of blessing in our biblical narrative. Blessing is a word, of course, that we throw around very casually, and any of you who has received an E-mail from me know that I typically end my E-mails with “Blessings”, signed “Pastor Tom”, so we throw the word “blessing” around like it means nothing or everything, but we just use it a lot.

In the South, especially, we can legitimate any behavior as long as we bless it, or at least any gossip about any behavior, so you will hear people saying something like “You know my neighbor Mary Sue? Well, she’s just sleeping around with the whole neighborhood, bless her heart!” You can say anything you want if you bless it, so we are not particularly in tune to what blessing really means.

Biblically speaking, this is what a blessing is. A blessing, as understood in the biblical narrative, is an act, through speech or gesture, whereby one party transmits power for life to another party. It is where power is given to another, power for life. Viewed primitively, the transmission is somehow a quasi-magical event that is successful in producing a desired effect and, of course, the most well-known power for life that is transmitted as a concern of blessing is the blessings for prosperity, for wealth, for health, and for fertility. In the Bible, you hear about these people being blessed or giving

blessings so that they will have lots of kids, that they will have lots of good health, lots of material abundance and, on Super Bowl Sunday, lots of dips and chips.

Now, in the Bible, who gives these blessings? The first entity, of course, in the Bible that gives blessing is God. God is the primary giver of blessing in the Bible. So, of birds and fish and animals and humankind, in Genesis 1:28, it says God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth". It is the story of creation and God is blessing all these animals, plants and people and so forth, and the blessing is that you will multiply but God, of course, is not the only one who blesses in the Bible. There are also human agents who are seen to be bearers of God's power to bless. These are people in the Bible who can mediate blessing, so Israel is to be a blessing to the nations of the earth and, in Genesis 12, we have the call of Abraham, which is all about blessing. It says "Now the Lord said to Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make 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 you bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed". So, if you hook up with Israel, you will find blessing. Israel will have the power to bless others, and its priests will have the power to bless others also. In the biblical notion of blessing, priests are sort of given this special gift to bless others, so in Numbers 6, which we read just a moment ago, we have Aaron blessing. It says "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace". Through these words of the priest, Aaron, blessing is bestowed upon the people of Israel. So, throughout the biblical narrative, blessing is bestowed by God, blessing is bestowed by the priests of Israel, and blessing is bestowed by other people along the story and the journey of faith.

Now, what is perhaps most interesting within the biblical tradition of blessing are the many instances in which the human agent, be it an individual or the community of faith as a whole, turns the focus of its power to bless, its power to give life, to God. We hear about this giving of life and blessing to God most powerfully in the Psalms, so Psalms 16 says "I bless the Lord who gives me counsel". Psalms 34 says "I will bless the Lord at all times" and Psalms 63 says "I will bless you as long as I live" and Psalms 103 says "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me. Bless his holy name".

So, the Bible has people offering a blessing to God, offering life to God. Now, think about what is changing here. We have placed God in our understanding of God so outside of our personal experience, how could it be that God needs our blessing? How could it be that God needs the power of life from us, and what does this reversal of blessing have to say about God?

Listen to this. Claus Westermann is an Old Testament scholar, among a number of scholars, who has studied this idea of blessing as it is understood in the Old Testament, and especially as it is understood for ancient Israel. What Westermann argues is that behind the familiar language of blessings offered to God is an ancient religious sense that, on occasion, God is so diminished and without power that God needs new energy from the worshipping community, and he says that such notions of blessings allude to the vulnerability and the fragile nature of God.

We tend to think that God is all powerful and all-knowing and forever and ever and ever going to carry on, but these ancient notions of blessing seem to indicate that perhaps God is not always filled with power. Let's think about the implications of that. If it is true that God sometimes needs our power, what it perhaps means, first of all, is that our relationship with God is so intimate and so tangled up together that, in fact, neither one of us, neither God nor humanity, can do very well what we are supposed to do without each other. That we need to be lifted up by God and that God needs to be lifted up by us is an unbelievable notion of our relationship with God, that WE have a responsibility for the life power of God. It is a very different notion, but it is very biblical in one sense. Then, if you think about that, if God, in fact, needs us, if we are truly in relationship with God that includes both the receiving of blessing and the giving of blessing, then the importance of worship is critical.

The importance of us gathering together each Sunday and giving praise and thanks to God is critical to the relationship. To be in dialogue with one another and to be in dialogue with God and to receive God's blessings is what makes it all alive. God doesn't just sort of exist alone outside of our lives. As I said last Sunday, God is in the mess, but God is there hand in hand with us. I was thinking about this early this morning. I was thinking, do I believe this? This is really new to me. Should I share this with the congregation, or am I going to get fired later on?

This sanctuary is our home court. This is our home court with God, and everyone knows that the home court advantage is real, because there is energy being transmitted between the home team and the home team crowd, and if you have 36,000 fans cheering for the home team, then Syracuse always wins! I think it is something like that.

We are in this energy exchanging relationship with God, so when we hear talk about the death of God, we are hearing about the death of the human soul. We are hearing about a culture that has given up talking to God. We are hearing about a culture that has turned in its relationship and is back and forth with the holy one or the idols of culture. Israel was constantly in this dialogue with God, arguing with God, talking with God, pleading on behalf of God, acknowledging that we are in this relationship with God.

I am at the point where I am starting to wonder if the renewal of the church, if the renewal of Peace Church, if the renewal of the gospel in our world may very well have to do with our ability and commitment to once again become people of blessing, people who receive the blessings of others, people who receive the blessings of God, people who share those blessings with others and, perhaps most of all, people who bless God with the power of life.

There are bumper stickers that say "God Bless America", and there is a counter-sticker that says "America Bless God", so we struggle with this idea, but being here on Sunday mornings together as the body of Christ, and giving God thanks and praise, I am convinced, is critical to our relationship with God remaining alive and growing and vital to how we live and to how we, as a church, witness to the God of love, so we give thanks today, and we struggle with the blessings that we receive and experience and the blessings that we are to give back. Thanks be to God. Amen.