

“Blessed are the Rats”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Lunar New Year Service
February 2, 2020- The Year of the Rat!

Micah 6:1-8
Matthew 5:1-12

This is the year for unexpected blessing. The Chinese Zodiac tells us that this is the Year of the Rat, and so we celebrate an animal who does not normally get much celebration. Without reading what is said in Asian traditions about Rats, you might feel a pang of sympathy for people born in those years. When we usually think about rats, we think about the grit of the New York Subway. We think of the animals who spread the Plague in Europe in the middle ages-- and this year as threats of the new Coronavirus put a cloud over New Year celebrations in China, anxiety is high over the threat of disease. I have never had rats in my home, but I grew up with gerbils and hamsters as pets. For that reason, in my first solo apartment as an adult, when I found a mouse in my kitchen, I caught it and gently released it to the parking lot behind my apartment. I remember the alley cat looking at me with a side-eye glance, as if to say, “You fool!” Sure enough, the next night I heard and saw a mouse again in my kitchen. This time I drove it far away and released it in a park. Since then I have not been as humane to mice, and I can guarantee that if we ever found a rat in our home, you can guarantee I will not be showing mercy.

But for those born in the Year of the Rat, this is your time of blessing! The Chinese Zodiac reveals people born in the Year of the Rat-- that means you turn 12 or any multiple of 12 this year-- as flexible in a variety of different relationships and situations, successful in career, resourceful and inquisitive, love a good challenge, care for family, and clever, and resilient. A rat is the most likely to survive a natural disaster. The Year of the Rat is the first zodiac sign in the Chinese zodiac cycle. According to the Chinese zodiac story, in the competition held by the Jade Emperor to decide the zodiac animals, the quick-witted rat asked the diligent ox to take him on a ride to cross the river and jumped down before the ox crossed the finish line, so the rat won the race and became the first of the zodiac animals.¹

¹ <https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/chinese-zodiac/rat.htm>

The various websites I consulted had mostly good things to say about Rats; and in the flaws listed, there were no more than the other creatures of the Zodiac. Though I am not a Rat, I can see unexpected blessing in the identity of being a Rat.

Jesus has a lot to say about blessing in the Beatitudes, as part of his Sermon on the Mount. This list of blessings is more than the little strip of paper that tumbles out of a fortune cookie when you crack it. It is about more than finding good fortune, more even than happiness. These are blessings that, if they take hold of you, will shape your life and can even shape a community. But, like celebrating rats, the sources of these blessings are not common sense.

Imagine you were one of those people sitting with Jesus atop a mountain. These Beatitudes, or blessings, as we call them, are the first public speech we hear from Jesus in Matthew. It is not insignificant for Matthew that this sermon happens on a mountain. By placing Jesus up there, he becomes like Moses who encounters God on Mount Sinai, and later reveals the holy laws God has shared with him to the people. And we know that Jesus, before beginning his public ministry, spent 40 days in the wilderness, and as he grappled with temptation, he heard the coaxing of Satan calling him atop a mountain, offering to him all the kingdoms and splendor and power if only Jesus would follow him.

So we know what Jesus will say next will carry the wisdom and spirit of all that has happened on mountaintops before this moment. Get comfortable; the disciples sitting around Jesus probably didn't even notice the dust between their toes, the grass itching their legs, or the pebbles digging into their knees. Those things all disappear in the face of true blessing.

The words Jesus gifted to his listeners offered a surprising strength that would help them through their years of discipleship, which included many holy acts and loving care, but also at times suffering and even death. I am reminded of a Korean friend I had in seminary named Jae Lee; he shared with me a daily practice he does: patting his hands, one over the other, repeatedly. It seems like a very gentle gesture, but he told me that a drip of water has a seemingly gentle impact, but years and years of this single drip can actually split stone. Likewise, he practices this hand patting each day, believing that he is training his muscles in his arms and hands for incredible strength.

That is something that these Beatitudes, or blessings do: they seem gentle, and maybe even ineffective. They highlight those who may seem powerless or unnoticed; certainly these people Jesus mentions are not the "winners" according to society's rules. But in

fact, these words of Jesus bless those very people with an incredible strength that comes from God. At face value, they are unexpected. At a deeper level, they are revolutionary.

In fact, Gandhi in India spent time reading the bible, and Jesus' sermon on the Mount inspired him and helped him to articulate his doctrine of nonviolence, which changed the course of history in India, and inspired movements for peace across the world.

Let me tell you something about unexpected blessing. My family took part in 9 days of prayer following my father-in-law's death. In Filipino Catholic tradition, these are called Novenas, and it is believed these prayers help to send the spirit of the loved one into heaven to be with God. Now I am pretty clear on my understanding of theology, shaped by a Reformed, Presbyterian background, that the grace of God, in allowing us to live into God's eternal love, does not depend on how many prayers are said at someone's death. I don't think that is the key to getting into heaven. But regardless of what I think theologically, it was no question of whether I would attend and take part in those prayers. Family duty, honor, and loyalty-- all important Asian values, as I understand-- required it, no matter what we believe or are comfortable with. And so I prayed the novenas, trusting God to sort out the meaning.

The practice actually surprised me in how much it blessed me. What blessed me, what blessed our family, is taking part in something that felt like a group of spiritual midwives, helping to birth my father-in-law from one existence into another. And while I don't necessarily believe that we need the prayers of the faithful in order to ensure we get into heaven, it occurred to me in this context that salvation does not have to be an individual, personal endeavor. Salvation is the work of a community, praying in rhythm and cadence, and sealing the deal each night with mounds of Filipino food. I did not expect these unfamiliar words to bless me, but as much as they blessed my father-in-law's departing spirit, they blessed me too.

Jesus caught on to a truth that many Asian teachings also know. The Yin and Yang sign has an S-curve that divides a circle into black and white, on the black side there is just a touch of white, and on the white side there is just a touch of black. Just so, Jesus taught that within suffering, we might find our blessing. Inside of what is hard, is something soft and merciful. Darkness holds light, and light has its shadows. Even in our goodness, there is a glimmer of evil-- and even the most evil person among us holds the capacity for goodness. And, as the cross shows us, within our death, there will be life.

We are blessed to know these things. We are blessed to live these things. Thanks be to God. Amen.