



given

THE FORGOTTEN MEANING
AND PRACTICE OF BLESSING

T I N A B O E S C H

Our efforts to express blessing to others often become routine and trite. However, reading this book will awaken the spirit to the power of words of blessing.

GARY D. CHAPMAN, author of *The 5 Love Languages*

I started reading Tina Boesch's book like a freight train rushing to its destination. Instead, I found myself on a slow hike, immersing myself in the words that caused me to observe Scripture and principles of blessing in a new way. Her words left me captivated with a desire to be like Jacob and wrestle with God until receiving a blessing.

KELLY KING, manager of magazines/devotional publishing and women's ministry training at LifeWay Christian Resources

Tina tells the biblical story with great attention to narrative detail and has chosen her examples astutely. Interwoven with all this are many wonderful stories from her own and others' lives, which illuminate the themes she's trying to get across.

IAIN W. PROVAN, Marshall Sheppard Professor of Biblical Studies at Regent College

In our day, "blessing" has sadly been reduced to a hashtag, frequently used in a shallow or braggadocio way. But in *Given*, Tina Boesch unpacks the richness of the biblical meaning of blessing. Her writing is exquisite, poetic, and rooted in the biblical narrative. In the truest sense of the word, Tina has richly blessed the family of God with her book. I highly recommend!

SUSIE HAWKINS, speaker and author of *From One Ministry Wife to Another: Honest Conversations about Ministry Connections*

Tina Boesch can bless in a wide range of modes: artist, art scholar, tour guide, theological teacher, evangelist, hostess, daughter, sister, friend, wife, mother, and more. This beautiful book comes from a heart ready to bless, a mind brimming with good things, and a mouth able to put things fitly, “like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11)—all bundled with a strong back, capable hands, and a quick smile. Come and be blessed!

JOHN G. STACKHOUSE, JR., Samuel J. Mikolaski Professor of Religious Studies at Crandall University

Given is a book that should not be ignored. In it, Tina Boesch explores the biblically significant notion of “blessing.” Rejecting both the prosperity gospel’s reduction of “blessing” to economic success and many evangelicals’ reduction of it to some sort of vague future hope, she argues that the ultimate expression of blessing is the Cross, where Christ gave himself on our behalf, blessing us so that we could bless others—even our enemies. In a delightful and surprising manner, *Given* not only explores the richness of biblical teaching but also takes the reader on a journey through history and across the globe. Highly recommended.

BRUCE ASHFORD, dean of faculty at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *Letters to an American Christian*

A year or so ago, I was led to Tina Boesch’s blog and soon found myself binge-reading her posts. She has a tremendous way with the English language—her prose is redolent, Christ centered, even pungent at times, but

always winsome. And this book is no exception. I have long thought that blessings and benedictions are a lost art among evangelicals, and Tina's book is the very thing we need to recover a vital part of our heritage. May it be widely read, appreciated, and put into practice!

MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN, professor of church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Given brings back the soul songs we should've been singing to each other for centuries. It's like a deep breath that pulls the reader into a place of rest, a place where God himself and his goodness is enough—a place where we live to share that goodness with others.

GRACE THORNTON, author of *I Don't Wait Anymore: Letting Go of Expectations and Grasping God's Adventure for You*

What the next generation looks for is legacy. How do the decisions we make today affect their tomorrows? In this book, Tina talks about what's obvious and not-so-obvious in the legacy of blessing that we offer to those in our lives. Her perspective is practical and demonstrated through history and personal experience. If we're able to extend that hope to others, we hold a gift few fully comprehend.

REGGIE JOINER, founder and CEO at Orange

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AND PRACTICE OF BLESSING

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TINA BOESCH

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Given: The Forgotten Meaning and Practice of Blessing

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*For Brett, who chose to make home with me,
and
for my parents, Paula and Ken Hemphill,
who first introduced me to the shine.
“May your hearts live forever!”*

PSALM 22:26

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chapter 1

BLESSING IN THE BEGINNING

INTO RELATIONSHIP

*Life be in my speech,
Sense in what I say,
The bloom of cherries on my lips,
Till I come back again.
The love Christ Jesus gave
Be filling every heart for me,
The love Christ Jesus gave
Filling me for every one.*

TRADITIONAL SCOTTISH BLESSING,
NINETEENTH CENTURY

There are conversations that hang in the air. Some words dissipate like vapor, but others linger, their full force felt weeks, months, or even years later, as they settle in our minds and hearts. Having taken up residence, they push us into unexplored territories. Some conversations acquire a life all their own. One such conversation launched my search to understand the meaning of blessing.

I remember the clear winter day and the aching of the ash-colored branches stoic in the cold outside my apartment. I remember the cast of light slanting through the windows and the crisp outlines of buildings framing the glittering waters of the Bosphorus, the strait that divides Europe and Asia and runs through the heart of Istanbul, Turkey. And I remember the earnest look of delight on my friend's bright face as we talked about my sister and her new baby.

We sat on my couch, relaxed in faded jeans and sock feet. As we chatted in Turkish, I sensed my friend's earnest joy—she longed to see the baby, to speak with my sister, to wish her well, to bless her. I soon found myself pushing aside delicate, tulip-shaped chai glasses to make space for my laptop on the coffee table in front of us so that we could video chat on Skype.

Just before we called, my friend paused. She wasn't confident she would say the right thing. So she asked me what to say in English to someone who's just had a baby. I replied matter-of-factly, "We say, 'Congratulations.'"

My Muslim friend looked dubious. "No," she pressed, "I mean what do Christians say *as a blessing*?"

I paused, bewildered by the pointedness of her question. I repeated, "Honestly, we just say, 'Congratulations.'"

Her brow knit, betraying her frustration. I could see disappointment hovering in her eyes. “You say congratulations all the time,” she observed. “‘Congratulations’ *isn’t* a blessing.”

She was right. “Congratulations” *isn’t* a blessing.

In Turkish, the gracious thing to say on the occasion of the birth of a baby is *Analı babalı büyütsün*. Roughly translated, the words mean, “May you grow up together with your mother and father.” The blessing conveyed by that concise phrase is magnificent. So much good is expressed by a simple, compact blessing. The phrase efficiently encapsulates a prayer for the health and protection of the baby, for the long life of the mother and father, and for the integrity of the family. No wonder “Congratulations” was a disappointment.

I certainly don’t mean to say that “Congratulations” is a bad sentiment; it’s just a thin one. *Congratulations*, a word with Latin roots and a Middle English pedigree, means that I share your joy, I give thanks with you.¹ Celebrating with friends and rejoicing with those who rejoice is vital; it’s a basic minimum for any relationship. But “Congratulations” is of the moment—it references only how I’m feeling now; it doesn’t reach forward into what will be, into the good I hope to see unfold in the future. And it doesn’t invite God to be present in our lives by expressing what he may accomplish in the days to come.

The future is the province of blessing. Blessings are prayers with the horizon in view. They communicate good that I long to see realized in your life, and they acknowledge, implicitly, that God alone is capable of accomplishing that good. Blessings carry us from the present moment into future grace.

“Blessing . . .” reflects the poet John O’Donohue, “animates on the deepest threshold between being and becoming.”²

While the conversation with my Turkish friend was simmering in my mind, I was learning to do life with my family in one of the most storied cities in the world—Istanbul, Turkey. I’ve lived most of the last twenty years overseas—in Italy, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and most recently, Turkey. Crossing cultures shakes me out of familiar, comfortable patterns of speaking and thinking, challenging me to acquire new ways of expressing myself that sometimes cast a clarifying light on the world.

As I was blundering my way through learning Turkish, I began to realize that many basic phrases I was using every day were simple blessings. To a baker making a traditional pastry: *Elinize sağlık*, “Health to your hands.” To a neighbor coming down with a cold: *Geçmiş olsun*, “May it pass.” To a bride at her wedding: *Bir yastıkta kocayın*, “May you sleep together on the same pillow.” To a student beginning the school year: *Hayırlı olsun*, “May it be successful.” To a friend leaving on a long drive: *Yolun açık olsun*, “May the way be open” (a blessing needed in a city of about fifteen million where gridlock is part of daily life). Sometimes, I heard the greeting that is also a profound blessing, *Selamun aleyküm*, “Peace be with you.”

Peace be with you—those words have such a powerful resonance. After Jesus’ resurrection, they were the first words Jesus spoke to his disciples, who were cowering together in a locked room, immobilized by fear. He greeted them with a blessing of peace and then he commissioned them with the same blessing, saying, “*Peace be with you!* As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21, NIV, emphasis

added). This peace is much more than a wish for the absence of conflict; this peace annihilates fear, heals brokenness, and restores relationship. This is the peace of *shalom*, a well-being that embraces body, mind, and soul, one that knits individuals together into flourishing community.

Or at least, that's what it should be. But the reality is that the words we say too often tend to lose their potency. When a blessing is reduced to a phrase we say out of habit, then it's drained of its significance. A blessing should be a sincere prayer that rises from our souls. When giving a blessing evolves into saying what we're expected to in a given situation, then it might be better not to say it at all. Perhaps this is the reason why some churches have abandoned the Christian practice of the sharing of peace during worship. I suspect they did so out of recognition that the people in the pews, arena seats, or folding chairs turning to greet their neighbors were mouthing words that no longer conveyed the good they were meant to embody. When the blessing of peace becomes a conventional greeting synonymous with "hello" in Christian fellowship, we should consider whether we've forgotten the depth of meaning the blessing originally encapsulated.

Before I moved to a culture in which blessing is woven into everyday social interactions, I paid no attention whatsoever to the role blessing played in the Bible and in God's history with his people. Western culture is so thoroughly secularized that it has, for the most part, long been stripped of the language of blessing. In public conversations, the remnants of blessing have been reduced to meaningless cliché, a reality that is best illustrated by the reflexive instinct to say

“Bless you” after a sneeze. Even in religious circles, blessing doesn’t pack much of a punch. I grew up hearing polite, silver-haired ladies exclaim, “Honey, bless your heart”—a sentimental expression that often conveys genuine affection and sometimes a hint of gentle dismissal, but never a sense of power and purpose.

There are a lot of mixed messages out there about blessing. On one hand, some people seem to think blessing is material—health, wealth, status, palatial homes, private jets, and the freedom to relax, settle into a lounge chair, and savor the benefits of the “good” life. This is the message underlying the prosperity gospel, religion that encourages people to cash in with God. Manipulative preachers line their pockets while convincing people to give generously in order to “receive a blessing” in return. On the other hand, some spiritualize blessing to the point that it doesn’t have any real implication for living in the world. Blessing becomes a vague future hope—a heavenly reward, but not a present reality. Which is the true meaning of God’s blessing? Material or spiritual? Is God’s blessing for now or for later?

I suspect that these approaches to understanding the meaning and practice of blessing don’t exactly jive with the picture painted in Scripture. Navigating the confusion around blessing will require going back to the source, a deep dive into God’s Word. Scripture is by nature as confrontational as it is comforting. And it is confronting me with the challenge of getting to the bottom of the meaning of a concept I had basically written off.

I’ll have to work to unearth the relationship between blessing and God’s mission if I want to understand its relevance

for my life. I long to understand all that the call to bless means, not just theoretically but also practically. How do the complex characters we meet in Scripture bless one another? Does the Bible offer any blessings that can be woven into daily life? Do I know how to bless my husband, my kids, my friends, my neighbors? Am I prepared to embrace the sharp edge of blessing—Jesus’ call to bless those who curse? How to become a river, not a reservoir, of God’s blessing?

There’s so much distrust in our world these days, but blessings have a way of breaking through the unease because they give voice to the intentions of a heart that desires abundant life for others. Abundant life is such a fundamental blessing that when I open the Bible in search of blessing, it’s the first one I find.

The Origin of Blessing

The first blessing in the Bible shows up in the first chapter of the first book—Genesis. The Hebrew root of the word “bless”—*barak*—is used eighty-eight times in Genesis, more than in any other Old Testament book.³ Only the frequency of usage in the Psalms and Deuteronomy even comes close. The preeminence of blessing as an essential theme in the book that sets the stage for all that follows is reinforced by its appearance right at the start of the Creation story.

Appreciating the power of blessing begins with recognizing the generative power of the spoken word. In Genesis, there’s no more vital power than God’s word. God speaks and sparks fly, electrifying the empty darkness. God’s word calls being into existence and transforms chaotic nothingness

into organic, ordered beauty. Over the course of seven days, God's word is a creative force. Every time God speaks, a new reality is born.

While not quite conforming to the norms of Hebrew poetry, there's a lyrical, hymnic quality to the first chapter of Genesis that makes me feel as though I'm listening to music scored on a cosmic scale:

*God said
and it was so,
God saw
that it was good,
and there was evening
and there was morning,
a new day dawns.*

With the dawn, I pause, breathe in, and prepare for the next movement. This pattern is repeated through the first four days, but then there's one critical addition to the refrain. On the final three days of Creation, God blesses. It's not until God makes living, breathing beings that he speaks blessing. Observing the oceans and sky roiling with new life, Genesis 1:22 says, "And *God blessed them*, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth'" (emphasis added).

The first blessing in the Bible is life that flourishes and makes more life: *Be fruitful and multiply*. My entire life I've read these words as a command, but now I realize they are a blessing. God isn't barking out an order to obey, he's bestowing a gift of abundant life to receive. How I read this first

interaction between God and his creation is bound to shape my impression of the character of the Creator revealed in these verses.

In Genesis, God creates *and* he blesses—two distinct but marvelously complementary actions. His creative word is the source of life in the present, and his blessing of fruitfulness and multiplication—of fertility and abundance—is the wellspring of our future existence. God’s blessing propels life forward—it is the “vital, effective power that makes the future possible.”⁴ God’s blessing is more than a wish, more than a hope—it’s a positive statement of what will be. God is not saying that life *should* multiply; he’s saying that life *will* multiply.

Folded within God’s blessing is a promise of what will become reality: It prophetically reaches into the future. If we read the early chapters of Genesis in light of the entire book, we find that God’s blessing is unfailingly effective. Genealogies give structure to the narrative and testify to the vitality of his blessing of fertility. Adam, Noah, Esau, and Jacob all saw their family lines multiply. Jacob alone could count sixty-six direct descendants (Genesis 46:26). Blessing dovetails with prophecy in the way both lean into the future. Blessing breathes newness into our spirits by enabling us to envision a path forward with God, a new reality toward which we will move in faith. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, “We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given.”⁵ God’s blessing energizes us because it touches on what will be given, lifting us from present reality into future grace.

God’s blessing is an essential, vital power for life, and when God’s blessing is directed *to* us, it’s also an invitation to

relationship. When God creates man and woman in his own image, he not only speaks a blessing *over* them but also speaks blessing *to* them. In Genesis 1:28, when God first addresses Adam and Eve, the addition of a preposition that wasn't there in God's blessing of the animals is significant: "God said *to* them, 'Be fruitful and multiply'" (emphasis added).

On the fifth day, when God blesses the birds and the fish, he doesn't speak blessing *to* them the way he does to Adam and Eve. God's relationship with human beings would be different from his relationship to other living creatures. He speaks a blessing *to* man and woman; he converses *with* them. He gifts them with the responsibility of cultivating the Garden and caring for the animals inhabiting it, and later he walks alongside them in the cool of the day. This personal interaction distinguishes God's relationship with man and woman, who bear his image.

God's blessing is intimately relational because it invites communion. "The God who speaks through the Word," says Jacques Ellul, "is neither far off nor abstract. Rather, he is the creator by means of something that is primarily a means of relationship. . . . The God who creates through the Word is not outside his creation, but with it, and especially with Adam, who is made precisely in order to hear this very word and create this relationship with God. Having received the Word himself, Adam can respond to God *in dialogue*."⁶

God's blessing of man and woman is the first movement in a conversation. It's the opening of a dialogue with humanity. Genesis shows us that when God reaches out to us with blessing, he speaks first. If we're listening, we're free to respond either with blessing and obedience or with indifference and

disobedience. We hear the reverberations of the right response sung in Psalm 103: “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!” The appropriate, faithful response to God’s blessing is doxology—worship.

Before God’s blessing is material or spiritual, it’s relational. Before anything else, God’s blessing invites us into relationship with him, which is also the genesis of abundant life with others. The primal blessing of fruitfulness and multiplication is observable, physical, social. It’s earthy, even sensual, in the way it requires the involvement of our bodies. There’s no multiplication of life without touch, without intimacy, without sex. By blessing physical intimacy between husband and wife with fruitfulness, God affirms the essential goodness of living an embodied, relational existence.

Blessing Interrupted: The Birth of Curse

I remember sitting uncomfortably on a rust-colored vinyl couch waiting for a doctor to confirm my first pregnancy. I didn’t look pregnant, but I felt awful. Morning sickness never seemed to be confined to the morning. When I met the doctor who would shepherd me through the nine-month journey, he handed me his card, which proudly displayed the promise “Painless childbirth.” I wondered if it could be true.

Now I know that it was a hollow slogan, so hilariously out of touch with reality that only a detached observer of the process who was overly confident in the numbing effects of modern medicine could have written it. Since then, I’ve had three babies and three entirely different birthing experiences,

but I wouldn't describe any of them as painless. If God first blessed physical multiplication, what's gone so wrong?

Although Adam and Eve first lived in Eden in a state of blessedness suffused with God's presence, it wasn't long before another voice started speaking in the Garden. An insidious serpentine voice twisted the word of God in a way that caused Eve to question the goodness of her Maker. As Creator, God has the authority to set parameters for living in his blessing. Adam and Eve didn't live in a world of their own making—they inhabited one given to them as a trust.

In Eden, God laid down the most minimal of boundaries. He gave the fruit of every tree in the Garden for food, save one—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent tempted Eve to taste the fruit from this tree. Temptation inspired doubt: “Did God actually say . . . ?” Doubt gave way to desire. Desire inspired transgression. And so, in the middle of a garden filled with delicious fruit growing on countless trees, Eve fixated on the fruit from the one and only tree that hadn't been given. Then she grasped the object of her desire and gave it to her husband. Together, Adam and Eve were saying through their taking that God's blessing of abundant provision wasn't enough. They wanted more. So rather than graciously receive all the good that had been given, they seized what had been forbidden. In that moment, they stepped out of God's blessing and into curse.

First off, it's important to note that God is not the source of the curse in the way he's the origin of blessing. God initiates blessing. He spoke blessing before Adam and Eve asked for it, before they even knew they needed it. But the curse entered creation as a consequence of human action defying

God's direction. Curse is the result of rebellion. God granted Adam and Eve agency to follow him or to go their own way, to obey or disobey. They chose the latter. So the curse is the result of sin—it's God's judgment of human defiance.

To Eve, God said,

I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.

GENESIS 3:16, NIV

In Eve's case, the curse tinges her most intimate experiences—childbearing and her interaction with her husband. The miraculous process of conceiving, birthing, and raising children—the central focus of God's initial blessing—now becomes laced with severe pain. The relationship between husband and wife, the two who should have been unified as one, is now tainted with power politics and shame. Because of the curse, there are fissures where there should have been wholeness, dominance and submission where there should have been union. In the words of Bruce Waltke, "Control has replaced freedom; coercion has replaced persuasion; division has replaced multiplication."⁷

To Adam, God said,

Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,

and you will eat the plants of the field.
 By the sweat of your brow
 you will eat your food
 until you return to the ground.

GENESIS 3:17-19, NIV

God's blessing produces abundance, but curse causes scarcity. Now thistles and thorns crop up in place of nourishing harvest. The delightful mission of caring for the earth and cultivating the Garden is transformed into painful toil.

Taken together, the effects of the curse are tension between men and women, discord where there had been harmony, alienation from God, and exile from the Garden. The bottom line: The curse devastates the environment and, most crucially, the most meaningful relationships.

But even within the judgment of the curse, there's mercy. God speaks directly to the serpent, saying, "Cursed are you" (Genesis 3:14). But his address to Adam is oblique: "*Cursed is the ground* because of you." God doesn't allow the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin to cancel his primal blessing. Men and women will still be fruitful and multiply, but now the experience that would have been only blessing will be infused with pain. Humans will still tend the earth, but the work that would have been done in a lush garden will be done in an unyielding environment. God's blessing endures, but rebelling against God's goodness has consequences. And it's not just Adam and Eve who felt them; we feel them too.

Feeling the Curse

Here I am living thousands of years after the curse was first pronounced, the beneficiary of centuries of technological and scientific breakthroughs from ultrasounds to anesthesia, and I still suffer its effects. The nausea, the contractions, the labor, the sutures, the abbreviated nights, the sore everything, the patience stretched thin by crying and colic and later by tantrums, the confusion about how to parent well, the distance I've felt from my husband and from my former self, the stress of providing for our children in an unyielding economic environment—here's the total package of pain embodied in the curse.

One of my kids—my two-year-old, *my baby*—hasn't slept well in two years. Night after night, I find myself padding across the hall to comfort her and end up wedged into her tiny toddler bed. The punishing physical exhaustion takes a toll on my marriage. I feel splintered, my patience whittled down, my judgment blurred. I sense myself withdrawing from the man I married. Our responses to each other are clipped. Our words bristle. The chill between us is only intensified by his quiet nature—he's not a man to vent his feelings. He detaches through silence, not by control or meanness. Here we are feeling the curse.

Leaning on the kitchen counter by the sink, I can feel the cold of the white marble floor through my slippers. My husband sits in a chair pulled up to our tiny wooden kitchen table. His forehead rests on his hand; his shoulders sag. It's been a hard day. Both of us are spent in our own ways—depleted, poured out. But as we talk, the severe edges of our

conversation soften. I move over to him and lay my hands on his shoulders and I pray blessing. I speak the good I long for him out loud. The distance closes a little. And I can feel a reorientation, a turning in my mind and heart. Instead of staying mired in my frustration, I look toward where I hope we're headed. We lean in. We move toward each other and move together toward God. Blessing—the antidote to curse.

I can't even begin to conceive of the regret Adam and Eve must have felt as they stumbled out of the Garden. They might have left empty-handed, but their hearts were loaded with a terrible burden. They knew that the curse would affect not only their own lives but also the lives of their children and their children's children. The pain of childbirth and the hardening of the ground was nothing compared to the pain of fractured relationships and the loss of intimacy with God.

In *Paradise Lost*, an epic portrayal of the first few chapters of Genesis, John Milton gives voice to Adam's despair.

*Accurst of blessed? Hide me from the face
Of God.
All that I eat or drink, or shall beget,
Is propagated curse.*

As Adam ponders the terrible inheritance of brokenness that he's leaving behind, an impossible thought occurs to him: He wishes that he could take the curse upon himself so the world could live in God's blessing.

*. . . in me all
Posterity stands cursed: fair patrimony*

*That I must leave ye, Sons! O, were I able
 To waste it all myself, and leave ye none!
 So disinherited, how would you bless
 Me, now your curse!*⁸

Milton's imaginative portrayal of Adam's longing to spare future generations from the curse foreshadows the reality that one day, a new Man—a *new Adam*—will take upon himself the curse introduced by the first. His sacrificial act will free men and women from the power of the curse and the grip of sin and death.

How to return again to the original state, when relationships were whole and healthy and all was blessing? In many ways, this longing animates the story of the Bible—*return*. In God's judgment, he said that Adam would "return to the ground," but Adam must have yearned to return to God's blessing. How to return to the goodness of living in God's presence? How to be free of the curse? How to return to a state of relationship where man and woman live with one another, naked and unashamed, souls exposed but completely safe? How to live without anxiety, fear, division, dominance, sin, and the shadow of death? The hope of abolishing curse signifies the resolution to these questions because blessing won't return until the power of curse is canceled.

Given to Bless

The hills around Assisi, Italy, are dressed with the shimmering sage gray of olive leaves and the deep green of citrus groves. There aren't many tall trees, save for the elegant

Italian cypress. The wilderness doesn't feel very wild. Even though it's been years since I walked the paths meandering through those hills, I still recall the surprise of stumbling on a tiny, handmade cross, two twigs bound together by a stalk of grass. Holding the delicate symbol, I noticed another leaning beside the base of a tree trunk, then another balanced precariously on a tree limb. Because they were all made of bits of branch, they blended seamlessly into their environment. But once I knew what to look for, I began finding them everywhere—tiny testaments to God's glory tucked into unexpected places all across the landscape.

These diminutive crosses were left by pilgrims who came to visit the place where God called Francis of Assisi into a life of poverty and prayer. Before Francis was a monk, he was the son of a nobleman. Rich, privileged, and irresponsible, Francis was an unlikely ascetic. But an irresistible call and an undeniable vision of Christ transformed him. He renounced his wealth, physically stripping down to nothing in front of his father and a crowd of concerned townspeople.

A depiction of this public moment of decision appears frescoed on the wall of the Basilica of Saint Francis in the heart of Assisi. The fresco is one in a cycle of paintings made in the mid-thirteenth century usually attributed to Giotto di Bondone, whose naturalistic style became an inspiration to Renaissance masters like Michelangelo. In Giotto's painting, Francis stands with empty hands raised heavenward. A disembodied hand floats in the heavens, representing the presence of God. The index and middle fingers of God's hand are extended in a gesture that medieval Italians would have immediately recognized as a sign of blessing.⁹

The painting is a statement that by renouncing material wealth, Francis was determined to live solely dependent on God's blessing. And that is precisely what Francis did. He lived the rest of his life dedicated to God, excruciatingly poor and blazingly happy. His life reveals that having nothing at all isn't at odds with being blessed most of all because being blessed means living sustained by God's presence.

The crosses I found hidden in the woods surrounding Francis's hillside retreat testify to the monk's deep desire to identify with Christ by being crucified with him. Their location—outside in nature rather than confined to a church's interior—reflect his renowned friendly familiarity with the created world. In his solitude, Francis was said to preach to the birds, encouraging them to praise the one who made them. Francis didn't so much preach as sing. In G. K. Chesterton's estimation, "He was a poet whose whole life was a poem."¹⁰ He lived longing to walk with God in a world that was both garden and temple.

One episode in Francis's life that isn't well known is his venture into the camp of the sultan of Egypt, Malik al-Kamil. In a letter written in 1220 to the abbess of the Cistercian convent of Aywieères, a priest named Jacques de Vitry described Francis of Assisi's 1219 visit to the crusader camp in Damietta on the Nile delta in Egypt. Jacques expressed concern about the dangers of Francis's plan to meet with the sultan, since he was unlikely to return from this mission alive. Francis, however, was undeterred because he believed that God's blessing was intended not just for Europeans but for the whole world.¹¹

I'm reading about Francis's brave (some would say foolhardy) ventures while staying at a retreat center in the

foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It's winter and the trees are bare. I wake up in the silence before dawn. In the velvet black of very early morning, I'm sitting in an octagonal room with windows on nearly every side. Part of the reason I'm here is that I've been wrestling with the rootless nature of the life I believe was given to me. To begin to understand the inheritance of blessing that accompanies a demanding call away from home, I'll soon turn to study Abraham, a man destined to be a river of blessing that would flow to cover all the families of the earth. But right now, the glow of a lamp illuminates a page from Thomas Merton's *The New Man*:

To find the full meaning of our existence we must find not the meaning that we expect but the meaning that is revealed to us by God. . . .

Meaning is then not something we discover in ourselves, or in our lives. The meanings we are capable of discovering are never sufficient. The true meaning has to be revealed. It has to be "given" . . . *for life itself is, in the end, only significant in so far as it is given.*¹²

Glancing up from the book, over my right shoulder, I can see a pink glow beginning to warm the trunks of the oaks. I turn my head, looking now to the east, and I can see the first spark of amber warming the horizon through the tangle of bald branches. This dawn is *given*. This beauty is given as a gift, offered as blessing. I take a cue from this overture, realizing that I'm being invited to respond to the one who gives.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and everything within me
bless your holy name.*

*May every thought,
every word,
every impulse,
the whole of my inner being,
my way of relating to you throughout the day
bless your holy name.*

*Mend the cursed fractures caused by resistance to your will,
forgive my grasping, my taking.
May the world as it is
be transformed into the world that was meant to be
one word, one confession, one grace at a time,
until we return
to you.*

