

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
A God of Blessing
April 12, 2020
The Rev. Dr. John Judson

Exodus 14:21-27; Matthew 28:1-10

The sanctuary was beautiful. It had white stucco walls and gorgeous stained glass windows. The ceiling was made up of dark oak and the whole thing was tied together with large dark oak beams that spanned from one side of the sanctuary to the other. The hue of the pews blended with all of the dark oak to present a marvelous place in which to worship. The only issue was that it was dark. The lights hanging from the ceiling were contained in very attractive and intricate brass cylinders. And because of the lack of light, I could watch people cluster close together under the dim illumination coming from high above them. As the new pastor of this church I was hesitant to say anything about the lack of light. But after having been there a while I decided it was time. So, at a session meeting, I raised the issue and asked if the church had ever considered changing the lights. At first there was silence, then came the very serious answer. Those lights had been hand made by a member of the church and they were deeply cherished by everyone. Well, I continued, couldn't we put in brighter bulbs? No, the wiring would not allow it. At that moment I realized I would get nowhere. It reminded me of the old joke about how many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? The answer? Change, what do you mean change? That bulb was given by my grandparents! It was the best bulb we could ever buy in its day. If we wait long enough it just might work again. And who needs light anyway.

This was one of those powerful reminders that nine times out of ten people will choose stability over blessing every time. And I say stability over blessing, rather than stability over change, because sometimes change is not better than stability, but blessing always is. Blessing meaning enhancing the life of others, such as bringing more light to the sanctuary. And not only will people choose stability over blessing, they will actively oppose moving from stability **to** blessing. Any of you who have worked in a corporation, school or been part of a family have probably experienced the opposition that comes when a change, even a really good change, is being proposed. People will either try to sabotage or threaten in order to keep the community from being blessed. In this moment one of those examples is of churches who are still having in person services today because the stability of being together is preferred over the blessing of keeping their people safe from the Coronavirus. And these churches will defy the government in order to have their way. Why this matters this morning, is that this desire to choose stability over blessing forms the back story for both of our lessons.

The first has to do with the enslavement of the Hebrew people. The children of God had ended up in Egypt because of a famine. When they arrived they were given a territory in which they could live out their lives as shepherds and essentially bother no one. They were successful and prosperous and through that blessed the Egyptian Kingdom. They added to the GDP of the nation if you will. Over the course of time however, the Egyptians began to see the success of the Hebrews, as a threat to their national identity making them a target for the Egyptian government. The Egyptians feared the Hebrew might one day overwhelm them. So the Egyptians enslaved them. Then the Egyptians moved to extinguish them. Stability for the Egyptians was so important that they were willing to annihilate an entire people group. The Romans were not much different. They too desired stability over blessing. We can see this in the story of Jesus, who was someone who was bringing blessing to Galilee and Judea. Both of these places were hotbeds of revolution and resistance to the Romans. One would think that Jesus' message of loving and forgiving one's enemies, paying taxes, and talking about his kingdom not being of this world, would be welcomed by the powers in Jerusalem. That they would have seen this as offering blessing to the people and bringing peace. Yet they didn't. Any talk of a kingdom and a king other than those authorized by Rome was seen as destabilizing and in need of a severe response. Let me be clear, Jesus was no threat to the Roman Empire. He had no army. He had no massive following. All he had was a rag-tag group of Galilean peasants. But for Rome, that was enough. They executed Jesus as an example

to anyone else foolish enough to challenge the stability of Rome. Both of these Empires as Empires often do, chose stability over blessing. What neither of those civilizations understood however, was that God, YHWH, was not a God of stability, but was a God of blessing and just as importantly, would do whatever it took to secure blessing for the world.

The Egyptians were the first to learn this. After Pharaoh finally agreed to let God's people go free, he changed his mind. Chasing after them he had them, cornered against the sea. It was an easy takedown. The best army in the world against a defenseless and frightened group of former slaves. As far as Pharaoh was concerned, order and stability would soon be restored. But then, the unexpected happened. The waters of the sea parted, the Hebrews walked through on dry ground and then when the Egyptian army followed, they were swallowed by the waves. It turns out that the God of the Hebrews was not a god of stability but a god of blessing, meaning that God intervened to use God's people to bless the entire creation; to bless all the nations, including Egypt. And God would protect them in order for that blessing to become a reality. The same is true with the Romans. When they nailed Jesus to the cross they believed two things. First they believed that they had enhanced the stability of their Empire by ridding themselves of a wanna-be king. Second they believed that by so doing the fear of death would stop anyone from following in his footsteps. Again, they misjudged the God of the universe. This God was not a god of stability, but a god of blessing. This God was one who was going to bless the world by defeating the powers of sin and death in order to make the fullness of blessing available to all of creation. Which is why Easter matters so much.

I realize that this may not make a lot of sense. It may not because often what the church has done with Easter is that we have seen it as a one time event that allows us to gain eternal life. And as such what many of us have done with Easter is that we have put it in a box, put it on a shelf in our spiritual closets, only taking it down for memorial services or when we might be facing the end of our lives. In other words, while Easter matters, it only matters in certain moments. But Easter matters all the time. Easter matters because it is the unleashing of God's blessing of life and life abundant. It is the unleashing of God's love into the universe so that it can transform lives and families, and communities, and nations and all of creation. Think of Easter as ground zero for the spreading of a virus of blessing. And the only thing standing in the way of the spread is stability, meaning the unwillingness to reach out in love in new ways in new times. Which is why, I will repeat again, I love you all and I love this church. I do so because you all have chosen to be a church of blessing over stability. You have embraced worship on line...not a single criticism of our not meeting together. You have embraced giving online so that we can not only support the church but we can support hungry families in Pontiac. You have embraced calling one another and looking after one another in new and creative ways. You have, as Pastor Bethany said in her sunrise sermon, overwhelmed us with offers of help. You have chosen to make Easter more than a singular event to be boxed up and put away. You have made it a living reality in every day of the week.

So what happened with the lights? Well I worked with Ricky who was the the head of the property committee and a licensed electrician, to secretly install halogen lights, tucked tightly to the beams that spanned the sanctuary. Then one Sunday we turned them on before anyone arrived. No one said a thing. We did this two more weeks. Each week we watched as the people began to no longer cluster under the individuals bulbs; as they no longer squinted at their hymnals and bulletins. Then on the third Sunday I asked Ricky to turn off the new lights. People asked why we had turned out the lights. I replied that we had not turned out the lights, but that this was how they had been worshipping for the past 40 years. This is what choosing blessing over stability does. It banishes the darkness and allows new life to flourish.

My challenge for you this Easter Sunday is simple, to continue to be those who choose blessing over stability that we might let the virus of God's blessing spread around the world.