

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Making the World New: A New Blessing
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May 24, 2020

Joshua 1:1-9; 1 Peter 3:13-22

Good morning, church. It is wonderful to be in the house of the Lord today. It is wonderful to be at First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, and we are worshiping today in spirit. I feel your presence with me and I also feel the presence of our Lord and Savior. I feel the presence of saints who have gone on before us. So this is the day that the Lord has made and we will rejoice and be glad in it. Let us pray. Creative God, continue to be in our midst. Lord, continue to open up our spiritual eyes so we might see you, if only a glimpse. Continue to open up our spiritual ears so we might hear from you but a word, and Lord continue to soften these hardened hearts so that we would receive all that you have for us on this day, and forever more. It is in Jesus Christ's name that we pray. Let this body gather together in spirit and say, Amen.

Good morning again, church. On this weekend we commemorate Memorial Day weekend and it is the time when our country remembers fallen soldiers, those who have given their lives for us and for our safety. Many people are visiting cemeteries and memorials, and in recent times past we had a parade. Some of that has changed because of Covid-19, but we still take the time to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. I remember a team traveling to Arlington Virginia to see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It's a monument dedicated to the deceased US service members whose remains have not been identified. It is located in Arlington. It's the national cemetery, and since 1937 the Army has maintained a 24-hour vigil. They guard this tomb. On the tomb are three Greek figures representing Peace, Victory and Valor, and inscribed on the back of the tomb are the words, "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God." The men and the women who lost their lives serving are men and women of great courage. At this moment let us take a brief moment of silence recognizing and honoring those soldiers.

Brothers and sisters, here God says be strong and courageous do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you. God is with us. During this Covid-19, this global crisis, this pandemic, we are experiencing a different kind of courage. We are seeing courage in what some of us view as every day workers. Maybe they are the bus drivers, maybe there are those who clean the hospital rooms, maybe they're the ones who are in the grocery stores. We're calling them essential workers. Maybe they're the doctors or the nurses or the nursing assistants, maybe it's the respiratory therapists. We are seeing a new courage. Maybe it's a thing that we took for granted that these workers do every day of their lives, but during this pandemic it is increased. Hear God say, "Be strong, be courageous, for I am with you.

Before Moses died he would place his hands on Joshua. Because the Lord told Moses, you, Moses, will not lead the people to the promised land, it will be Joshua. You are to go and get him and anoint him. And that is what he did. When he laid his hands on Joshua, the Bible says the Lord gave Joshua wisdom. Joshua was also a soldier and was also one of great courage, but I wonder how he felt? He was second or third in line and he was just following Moses. Did he have any fear? Was he afraid at all when this charge was being placed on him? Church, hear God say be strong and courageous for I am with you.

The second text in 1st Peter talks about hope, encourages the church to do what is right. In studying this text I learned that this church was having some issues - maybe there was some slander, some folks talkin' about some folks. I know that doesn't happen here at First Pres Birmingham, but just work with me on this one. So Peter wrote a letter and he said, Do good, because it is better to suffer when you're doing good for Christ's sake. But then he says be prepared to be accountable for the hope that is in you, because sometimes when you do

good, sometimes when you wear masks, sometimes when you stay home to stay safe and you're still a hopeful people, folks want to know why. Where does that come from? How do you do that? Why do you do what you do? Church, hear God say be strong and courageous for I am with you, Church, we're not alone during this pandemic, we still serve a faithful God.

I am encouraged, because when this really started to heat up, I am grateful that our Administration said that worship is essential, because we already knew that, but from wisdom a decision was made that we needed to stay home to stay safe. And that wisdom in our leaders, in our church, in our session, they made a decision that we would worship differently. So it may be Facebook Live, YouTube, some are worshipping by Zoom, some are doing a teleconference, knowing that this building does not define who we are. We are God's people and God has called us to go therefore, and that is what our churches are doing in the midst of a crisis. We still found a way to Proclaim God's Good News. We have still found a way to serve God's people, brothers and sisters. Hear God say: Be strong and courageous, I am with you.

I'm a fourth-generation Presbyterian and there was a time in my life, 20 years ago, when I rededicated my life to God. I started out sitting in the pew, but I wasn't involved. But the Lord was talking to me and talking to me. The Holy Spirit was telling me I have to do something. Twenty years ago I got involved, and I got involved in youth ministry. And I was so excited and I called my uncle, Samuel Steel, and I said, "I'm leading!" And my uncle said, "Blessed Assurance!" Then I went home that day and God gave me these words that I want to share with you.

Blessed Assurance were the words that he said.
Angels rejoicing, a soul had been led
To the Prince of Peace to the God of love.
No more wandering, I'm focused above,
To say the right words to do the right thing
For God has given me a new song to sing.
Blessed Assurance is what was said to me
On the right hand of God is where I plan to be
For God is preparing my special place
I'll shout "Hallelujah!" when I see his face.
God is preparing but I'm working as well.
I'm working on my building and my story to tell
Of how I was lost and couldn't find my way
Because I had everything, I thought, no need to pray.
For the Bible says what profits a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?
So then I woke up (wake up, church) and I had to decide
Although I had everything, I was empty inside.
The cars, the houses, my friends, all great,
But who knew what really was to become of my fate?
The cars, they get old, the houses, they crumble,
My friends, my wonderful friends, aren't always there when I stumble.
Hear Jesus say, I am with you always.
So if you are confused or you're lonely or you're wandering and you can't find your way
Then you must listen to what I must say.
Confessing your heart and believe in his name,
Then Blessed Assurance will be yours to claim.

Brothers and sisters we are in the midst of a global crisis. Hear God say: Be strong and courageous, for I am with you always. Church, this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.