

Unexpected Blessings Exodus 16:2-15

Today is Trinity Sunday in the liturgical calendar, the day when we pause to think about the fact that God has come to His people historically in 3 different ways: Father, Son & Holy Spirit, which we call the Trinity. As Christians, we need to talk about God using in the full range of the Trinity, so that we fully appreciate who God is. Two weeks ago, Pastor Stu preached on the topic “It is OK to Fail,” and used Jesus as an example of someone folks thought was a failure. Last week, on Pentecost, I preached about the movement of the Holy Spirit in our denomination. This week, I reach back into the Old Testament to a story about God, the Father, and the Israelites. That’s the Trinity – Father, Son & Holy Ghost.

The setting for this passage from the Book of Exodus is that God has just brought the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt; they have crossed the Red Sea after God opened it up for them; and they are now in the desert trying to make their way to the Promised Land. And now we come to our passage for today.

Read Exodus 16:2-15. Pray.

“Those were the days.” If I had a dollar for every time I have heard that phrase used, I would be a rich woman. “I remember when gas was only 55 cents per gallon (1972); those were the days” “I remember when everyone went to church and this place was packed; those were the days.” And with the death of Chuck Noll, people will say, “I remember when the Steel Curtain was here and The Steelers were actually good under Coach Chuck Noll; those were the days.” Most of us have heard comments like these before, and, let’s be honest, most of us have made comments like these before, (I know I have). It’s human nature. It’s human nature to romanticize the days gone by and to want them back. It’s human nature even though we know that everything that happened in, say, 1972, when this church was packed and gas was 55 cents a gallon, was not all good. In 1972, we had the Watergate scandal going on and the downfall of President Nixon; we had the Vietnam War going on and all of the protests in this country about Vietnam, and we certainly did not have all of the wonderful technology in 1972 that we now have, like laptop computers and iPhones, but, still, for some folks, those were the days.

When I think about someone who really did “Those were the Days,” my mind goes back to the infamous Archie Bunker and the TV show All in the Family, which ran from 1971-1979. I grew up on a steady diet of Archie and Edith, whose opening theme song was, of course, “Those Were the Days.” (video) Archie was a middle class guy who would much rather live in the past than step out into the future. And every time his son-in-law (whom he called “Meathead”) would suggest that Archie try something new, Archie would meet with a diatribe about how much better everything was a days gone by. (By the way, some of his funniest rants are available for

viewing on you tube). Archie wanted Herbert Hoover to be president forever; he wanted to keep his little girl Gloria at home forever; and he wanted to keep coming home to dinner on the table, beer in his hand, sitting in his chair next to Edith, watching TV, forever. Archie made a career out of “Those were the days.”

We’re all a little bit like Archie Bunker, in a way, no matter what our age. We all like to hold on to the past, and the Israelites were too. They didn’t want change and they said so, repeatedly, right in front of Moses.

Our passage for today opens with the Israelites complaining, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the bread we wanted! But you, Moses, you have brought all of us out into the desert to starve. If only we were still in Egypt.” Do you see what they are doing here? They have been rescued by God from captivity, but at the first sign of trouble (when their bellies begin grumbling), they start singing the song “Those were the Days.” Is that really what they want? Would they truly rather be slaves to the Pharaoh than out in the desert relying on God for their very sustenance? I think not, but again, it is truly human nature to look back instead of looking forward.

And God hears their complaining, and through Moses, God says to them “Take it easy - I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and in the evening you shall know that it was me who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” So, God gives them “a fine flakey substance, as fine as frost on the ground.” But, yet, when the Israelites saw it, even after God told them he was sending it, they looked at the ground and said, “What is it?” They had no idea what it was.

My friends, it is certainly not a bad thing to talk about the past. It is certainly not a bad thing to reminisce. But when our looking to the past prevents us from seeing what God is doing right now in our midst, that is the problem. The Israelites could not appreciate the magnificent saving grace of God. They could not see Moses, the greatest prophet of all time right before them. They could not put their faith and trust in the God who had just saved them from destruction – a faith that should have taken them confidently into the future.

And so we come here today, on Trinity Sunday, to worship this God of the Israelites, this God of the Old Testament and of the New Testament, this God who has done so much for us in the person of Jesus Christ, yet we need to ask ourselves the question: “Are we the Israelites?” “Are we Archie Bunker?” “Do we forget to look for God’s movement in the world? Do we look at blessings in our lives and say ‘what is it?’” Do we misunderstand events and changes as only bad things and fail to remember as Paul tells us, in all things, God works for the good of those who love him? Just as the manna came down and the Israelites didn’t know what it was, so God’s blessings come to us in ways that we don’t always recognize. God’s mercy flows upon us in ways that might at first seem

shocking. God's grace leaks into the cracks of our mundane existence disguised as something that might at first might make us question or even turn away, but when we open ourselves to new possibilities, we see God's hand at work.

I am as guilty of this as anybody else, despite being a pastor. Someone with blinders on, unable to see God's blessings coming in from left field. I want to share an example with you now. Those of you who were here last week saw my daughter, Macy, get up with the graduates because she just graduated high school and is moving on to college. She is my second child to go to college, so I have been through the stressful college application process twice. When my oldest son Max was applying to school, I truly had my blinders on and I was living in my past.

Of course, I had my list ready to go. Of course, I did - I had this list made five years before he even applied. He was my son and I knew exactly where I wanted him to go to school. And it was Yale. I kid you not, I wanted him to go to Yale. Max is a very bright young man, so I thought, Yale. It was my dream, based in my past where I always admired Ivy League Schools. Didn't need to consult God; didn't really need to consult Max, he was going to Yale. In my mind, it was a done deal.

All along the way, there were many schools that sent Max letters and cards and emails, some offering very nice programs and scholarship opportunities. I didn't really take them seriously. Until one day, we got a big packet from Michigan State University. Max looked at it and came to me saying how great their program sounded – he could get a research job as a freshman, they had lots of scholarship opportunities, and he would really like being part of the Big Ten (Max is a sports fan). I said, “Sure, go ahead and apply, but we all really know that you are going to Yale.”

Well, Max made it through the first round for Yale, when lots of folks were turned down, but, in the end, he was not accepted into Yale. But all the while that Yale was getting further and further away, Michigan State was looking better and better. Long story short, Michigan State was the perfect fit for Max. He is getting a great education, he loves the school, he has made some fabulous lifelong friends, he has a lovely girlfriend of 2 years that I really think he wants to marry, and the best thing of all – I get to route for the Spartans for the rest of my life! (They won the Rose Bowl this year, you know!)

When I finally took my head out of the past and looked at the situation, I could clearly see God's hand at work, paving the way for Max to have a wonderful college experience. The same thing has happened with Macy as God has opened doors that I didn't even know existed for her in following her music career to Belmont University in Nashville, TN. Unexpected blessings rain down when we take the time to pay attention to what God is doing right here and right now in our midst. The manna that God gives us every day is truly astounding.

Today in Detroit Michigan, our General Assembly is gathering to meet for a week of worship, discussion and fellowship. We need to pray for Pastor Stu as he is part of that gathering. No matter which side of the issues you are on, we cannot deny that the folks gathered there are good Christian people who want to follow Christ in all that they do. I am absolutely certain that God will show up, that God will make his presence known and that God will shower some unexpected blessings upon this denomination. We just need to get ourselves out of the past, open our eyes to what God is doing in the present, and trust that God will lead us into the future as he has always done since the time of the Israelites. Manna still rains down upon us, my friends, we just need to know where to look for it. Praise be to God. Amen.