

“And What Then, and For What?”¹
August 11, 2024

Trinity Presbyterian Church – Santa Cruz, CA

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Greetings to you, Trinity Presbyterian Church of Santa Cruz, with the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As the newly-minted Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of San Jose, now entering this eighth week, I also extend greetings from the 36 other congregations, worshipping communities, fellowships, and affiliated non-profits which extend from Palo Alto to Gonzales to Watsonville, encompassing all of Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Monterey counties. We are excited for you all as you prepare to call a new pastor, and we in the presbytery join you in giving thanks to God for the pastoral care and leadership of my colleague, your transitional pastor, Larry Vallardo and his wife, Lorraine, for their commitment and dedication.

It is in this spirit of abundant gratitude that we gather in this space in this holy time as well as all of you joining online and those of you who will be watching this recording after the fact, for as the Psalmist says, I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living (Ps 27:13). Because we have seen it, and because we believe we will see it, and receive it and live it, we can testify. And testify we must. Because this world is hurting so much - the despondent teenager who looks downcast when he should be vibrant with energy and joy but faces the daunting prospect of the future when confronted with present realities, the older adult whose amber-colored cylinders in the bathroom cabinet multiply since last year - an increase in both cost and an acceleration of the reality that her body is quickly failing, mothers - not one, not

¹ Adapted from the sermon I preached on July 9, 2023 as part 1 of 6 in the daily sermon series “Benedictions: Healing Words for a Hurting World” at the Chautauqua Institution (New York). ©Neal D. Presa, 2023

10, but by the hundreds of thousands, clutching their belongings in plastic bags, their infants in one arm while trying to give a sense of security to another with the other arm making the dangerous thousand long trek northward for the illusion of a new and better life only to be stopped, to wait, and wait, and wait. A war that rages in Ukraine, a war that rages in Israel and Gaza and has every indication of spreading regionally into Lebanon, our own nation that heads into an election where everyday feels like the Divided States of America, independent existences from each other. .we need healing words for a hurting world more than ever. Ancient wisdom from the reservoir of faith. . the grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever so says the ancient Scripture.

Former British prime minister, William Gladstone, encountered the young son of one of his friends. The young man wanted the Prime Minister’s advice on his future career plans.

“First,” he explained, “I plan to complete my studies at Oxford.”

“Splendid,” replied the Prime Minister, “and what then?”

“Well, sir, I then plan to study the law and become a prominent barrister/lawyer.”

“Excellent,” responded Gladstone, “and what then?”

“Then I plan to stand for election and become a member of Parliament.”

“Wonderful,” said Gladstone, “and what then?”

“Then, sir, I plan to rise to prominence in the party and be appointed to a cabinet post.”

“A worthy ambition,” replied the senior statesman, “and what then?”

“O, Mr. Gladstone,” the boy blurted out a bit self-consciously, “I plan one day to become Prime Minister and serve my Queen with the same distinction as you.”

“A noble desire, young man, and what then?”

“Well, sir, I expect that in time I will be forced to retire from public life.”

“You will indeed,” replied the Prime Minister, “and what then?”

Puzzled by the question, the young man said hesitantly, “I expect then that one day I will die.”

“Yes you will, and what then?”

“I don’t know, sir, I have not thought any further than that.”

“Young man,” said Gladstone, “you are a fool. Go home and think of your life through from its end.”

So, my friends of Trinity Presbyterian Church of Santa Cruz, and what then?

While benedictions -- good words - are said at the end of a worship service like this one.

Or even the simple word “Goodbye” which in it’s Old English meant “God be with you,” why wait until the end. What if we continually lived with the ending at the beginning. Do as

Gladstone advised the young man, think through life, live life, from its end.

Imagine what this hurting world would be like if rather than waiting for a good word at the end, we offer from the get-go, “God be with you.”

It would be like eating at a restaurant and going straight for the dessert as the first course. Why not? Some of the kids and even grown-up kids might say that today, “Dr. Presa said we should have dessert first.”

There’s something to be said about living with the ending at the beginning. Because we end up as like the young man in Gladstone’s conversation, living life from this point and that point, from one day to the next but not really knowing, for what? And what then? And now what? We live and work and play 60, 70, 80, 90 years and what then.

It would be remarkable if from the beginning we started our lives, if we started our day with benediction, with a good word, with a blessing.

The Israelites desert travel from Egypt to the Promised Land, a decades upon decades trek was a long one. Some generations didn't make it. Moses himself didn't see the Promised Land.

But it was the ancient wisdom - the ancient stories that Jewish mothers and fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers read, and sung, they wrote it down, they dramatized it, they put it to worship, they had festivals, these were the reminders every single day of God, of their struggle, of God's love with them, of being a beloved community. So the benediction, the blessing that the Lord gives to Moses who in turn gives it to Aaron and to Aaron's sons. . .this is a blessing that is to carry the Israelites through every single day. It's a benediction that's not a last word because remember their journey was a long one. It's a blessing that carries them through. It's in Numbers 6 after all, and there are many more chapters to go and many more books after that, many more verses, and therefore many more struggles, much more blood, sweat, and tears.

Those ancient words:

“The Lord bless you and keep you

The Lord make his face to shine upon you

And be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

And then the text says, that blessing, that benediction effectively stamps the Lord's name on the Israelites and the Lord will bless them.

And what then?

The blessing and benediction offered to God's people, to you and me, is a stamp of God's name upon us, who by the saying of that blessing is claiming us, is saying "I am the Lord Your God, and You are My People." Or to put it in regular daily language, "I have your back. You belong to Me and we belong to God" and by saying it and offering it to another we are saying "We belong to God and we belong to one another." You belong. You matter. You are a precious child of God, created in God's image. No matter what others may say, or what culture or social media says, or what you might think of yourself. . . God's view of you is one who is so valuable and precious because you are loved, you are created in God's beautiful image. You are blessed.

Let's return to Gladstone for a moment. His father was an owner of enslaved persons, and Prime Minister Gladstone called for the compensation of slaveholders. He advocated for apprenticing enslaved people rather than immediately emancipating them. It was not until later in his life that he confessed that people were right, that slavery should be abolished.

We would ask Prime Minister Gladstone that same question, "and what then?" Had he thought through and prayed for life from its end, imagine how history would have been different had he called for the abolition of enslaved persons years prior.

You see, that question, "And what then?" goes to the purpose of our lives, and the purpose of benedictions.

"And what then?"

The Lord bless you and keep you.

It's not so much just to hoard our blessings, but to testify of God's abundant grace.

But it's not just for the sake of testifying of God's abundant grace for grace's sake

Or to have God prosper us for the sake of prospering.

Otherwise, we'd be bloated to the hilt with blessing upon blessing, when so many are hurting, hungry, and war-torn.

And what then?

From the time that our sons were infants, we prayed as a family, "Bless us Lord, that we may be a blessing to others." We continue this practice when we bless our sons who are both now in college. As well, whenever we check out of a hotel, we offer a generous gratuity to the unseen house, often unknown housekeeping staff, and with the gratuity we leave on the nightstand in the room, we leave a handwritten note thanking them for their service, expressing how we appreciate who they are and what they do, and then we offer a blessing to them and to their loved ones.

Offer that prayer to God, to make you a blessing to many:

Bless us with health, God, so we can be strong to serve and love.

Bless us with food, God, so we can feed our bodies but also share with others.

Bless us with a home, God, so we can live and play and pray in our family hearth, but also extend hospitality to others.

Bless us with an education and access to it, God, so we can use our minds to work and we can use knowledge for good purposes.

Bless us, Lord, so we that we may work to lift the downtrodden, pray for the brokenhearted, protest and advocate for the disempowered and victims of unjust systems.

Bless us, Lord, so that we may bless others in your name. So that we can testify of what You have done, and what You are able to do.

We bless others because we follow the life of Christ, who is God's Benediction – good word of blessing to us and to the world. Jesus Christ, who is identified in John 1:1 as the Word, is God's good word – Benediction. And so we bless in Christ's name.

It's a steadfast commitment to work and pray for a world where all can flourish, where all belong, where all can feel and know and experience they matter, that they are valued, that they are precious children created in the image of the Holy One. It's so that every single person will know they are blessed. We have been stamped with God's love, and mailed/sent, as it were, to be a blessing to all.

The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. It has both an upward, outward, and inward orientation all at the same time. (raise my arms and hands)

And what then?

To love God, to love neighbor and stranger, as we have been loved by this God.

Amen.