

**Sermon: To Be A Blessing**  
**Scripture: Genesis 12:1-9**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: November 19, 2023**

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Last week I spoke about apocalyptic thought in Jewish and Christian theology that begins to surface in the scriptures as we approach Advent, this promise that history has a point and the point is a final culmination in God's good designs and purposes for this world, an ending that is a beginning described as a Great Wedding Feast, the Messiah being the Bridegroom and a new or renewed heaven and earth as the setting and all of us - maybe - as the guests? Unfortunately it doesn't come across as all good news in biblical texts because of what precedes this beautiful culmination - the final tribulation, wars, disaster, great cataclysm. And the way it's often presented in certain Christian circles is that in this cataclysmic end there are many lost and condemned to eternal punishment before those saved get to the great Wedding Banquet and eternal bliss.

But there's one primary stumbling block to that framing of things and that is Jesus on the cross. More than any of his teachings and actions and even his victorious resurrection, it's Jesus' crucifixion that undermines and collapses the polarization of us against them, of the good against the bad, of the righteous in contrast to the unrighteous, the favored versus the disfavored, the blessed and the cursed. Because Jesus, God With Us, on the cross occupied the place of the them, the bad, the unrighteous, the disfavored, the excluded and forever revealed and became a source of God's favor and blessing for them, for us. The cross suggests, or proclaims that God is a God not of cursing but of blessing, that God is a God of love, not of control or power or might so much as love, for love does not demand and control us into obedience love can only suffer us to do whatever we do to ourselves and one another and in that unconditional love God hopes to make us

better than that, a God who blesses us with a dream that we will be a blessing to others.

It's not only there there in the culminating story of the passion of Christ, but it's in one of the foundational texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam together which Branda read for us this morning where Abraham, the Father of our 3 Faiths, receives God's promise and blessing not just for his sake and his people's sake but so that they can be a blessing for others, for all the nations in fact. In the very beginning we hear of this new revelation of a God of blessing and love that asked of His children to be a blessing to others. God says to Abraham "I will bless you and make of you a blessing." It's a simple and beautiful framing of the meaning of life that says we have been blessed by this life and we are to offer into it through our very lives blessing back. God blesses us, we are to bless others.

Jonathan Kozol, a writer and great advocate for public education for all children has written books centered on his travels throughout the country and in conversation with students and teachers especially in some of the poorest and most neglected communities. In his book *Ordinary Resurrections*, Kozol shares the story of a number of NYC children and the adults who teach them and care for them, especially in an after school program sponsored by an Episcopal Church in NYC. He writes about the blessing that certain of the Episcopal nuns are to the children they serve and conversely the blessing that the kids are to them.

In one of the scenes he writes about a troubled little boy named Elio who often acts out the grief and rage in his life in inappropriate ways.

He says to Kozol that when he misbehaves he knows that God cries. How do you know God cries? Kozol asks him. I can hear him crying. You can hear him? Yes, if I do something bad..." so what do you do? I go to the priest. Who is the priest? Mother Martha, he replies. And what do you say? Can you please give me bless? And what does she do? She goes upstairs to get the bowl, he says, a shining bowl. Kozol asks him if he knows what exactly is in the

bowl. Elio says “whole fly water”. What does that mean? Special water. And what makes it special? I don’t know. Well, what does she do with it? She sprinkles it with a big stick. Kozol continues - The big stick Elio alluded to, which I have now seen as it is used is called a aspergillum and is 7 inches long. The nun dips it in the silver bowl and lifts it high above the children’s heads, then shakes it many times in all directions. The ritual has less solemnity than I expected. The younger children in particular on hot days in the summer seem to find the sprinkling of water on their heads mostly a physical delight. They chatter like sparrows gathered near the spray of water from the fountain in a park. Elio’s tears - his sorrow, anger, even his contrition - seem to be forgotten. He glows with pleasure as the water trickles down his face. His eyes look radiant.<sup>1</sup>

To receive the blessing of life and to bless the lives of others. This is the kind of God we have, not one who comes in wrath to destroy the unrighteous and save the righteous. Jesus taught by what he did and what he said and how he gave up his life out of love that we have a God of a different order of things, a God of love, and as John said quite simply and quite clearly “whoever abides in love abides God and God in that person.” I John 4:17. And where we suffer in love God suffers in us. It’s a radically different statement from all other statements that we’ve heard about God being omniscient and omnipotent and the unmoved mover the impersonal energy force of life. It’s God as sprinkler of blessings, it’s God as upturned child’s face of receptive gratitude. It’s God as suffering son and it’s God as grieving father, cause that’s how love is in this world, it’s given and vulnerable to the beloved.

Those of you who grieve the death of a son, the death of a father, or a mother, the suffering of a loved one, you are in the throes of love and so close to God there, God is close to you. That’s one thing, one of the greatest things, that Jesus on the cross suggests - that in the suffering of love is God. Any reference to

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<sup>1</sup> From Jonathan Kozol’s *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope*

wrath in God, as Jurgen Moltmann suggests, is only God's cry of wounded love, who wants more for you and me and this world than we allow or believe. The better image is the parental God who adores Her children and because Her love is true and they are free, She cannot dictate their lives, She must suffer WITH them at times and at other times at best suffer FOR them. The Hebrew people refer to "hester panim" - the dark face of God - that is sometimes what we receive because in God's love for us God must respect our freedom and be hands off. But at other times we can and do experience the shining countenance of God from where Her blessing comes - "let God shine His countenance upon us and grant us peace." It's what the nuns experience in that school in NYC with the shining faces of children raised to their sprinkles of water. Listen again:

Katrice, one of the adult helpers in the after school program once told me she hasn't gotten a holiday from her other job in 7 years. Only when she's with the children does she seem to let herself relax... as the playfulness of children such as Elio elicits playfulness in her as well. In this way I start to understand the meaning of a priest in MA who has told me he believes children minister to grown-ups quite as much as grown-ups minister to children. "Holy water blesses children who receive it. It is holy, he reminds me. But the faces of children bring a blessing to the one who gives it. So all of these good things go back and forth." It's easy to believe that when you see the look on Mother Martha's face as she's surrounded by the children. "Of all the things I have to do here at the church," she told me once when she was carrying the silver bowl of holy water down the stairs into the afterschool, "this is the part I love the best." There was so much youthfulness then in her voice. The weariness and tension that are often in her eyes seemed to have disappeared. The kids came running when they saw her on the stairs. Katrice was watching from the side as Mother Martha raised the staff. The voice of the children filled the room the moment she began to shake the water, almost wildly in the

air. “Mother Martha! Mother Martha! Bless me Mother! Me too Mother! You forgot me, Mother! Bless me, bless me!”<sup>2</sup>

May God bless you and keep you and make God’s face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. And may you give thanks with all your heart among the nations and in knowing the blessed love of God, the Creator, the Christ and the Holy Spirit may you find ways of offering others blessing, in His name whose glory is sprinkle within and over all the earth.

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<sup>2</sup> From Jonathan Kozol’s *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope*