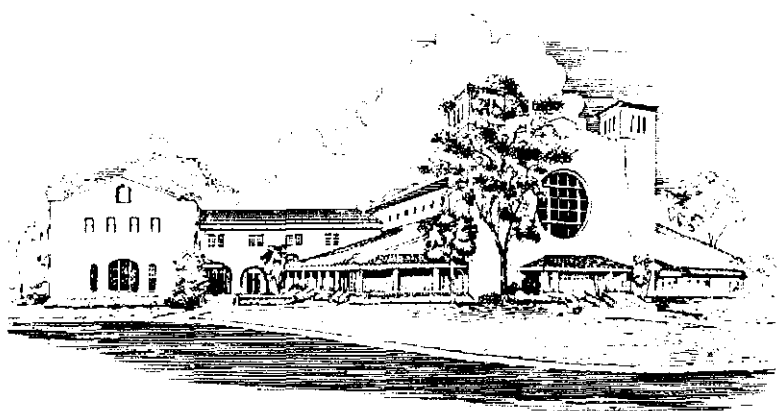


First Church Pulpit

"GOD BLESS AMERICA"

Text: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people whom he has chosen as his
heritage."
— (Psalm 33:12)



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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NOVEMBER 24, 1985

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I. "God"...I wonder first what you think about when you think about the word "God". I know some people conjure up an image of a stern and awful judge in the sky, who just cannot wait to get his hands on his wayward creatures to punish them for all their sins. I know others who assume "God" refers to the One who is a forgiving, loving Father, who is not naïve, who does not let you get away with just anything, One who makes demands upon your life and mine, and holds out an image of what He desires us to be. But when we fail, he knows our mortal frame, and offers His forgiveness in Christ.

The word itself in English, G-o-d has an uncertain etymology. Curiously, nobody is quite certain when it began to be used, or why. I was always taught in school that it came either directly out of German, or from an English word "gut", which means "good". That is, God is good. Apparently now many etymologists (the people who study words) say that might not be true. They say it probably came out of an original word in Middle English, which meant "pour", as you would pour the molten silver into a frame and form. Out of that mold would come a little god, much as they used to make their own private gods in the Old Testament, when Moses was up on the mountain, receiving the Ten Commandments. Aaron was down with the people, and they made themselves a golden god. It became an object of worship, a god. It could be.

The important question concerns what it means when you say it. That is what matters. I asked a junior high class of eighth graders once (and oh, boy, is is a journey teaching eighth graders! They keep you humble. You have to be flexible, and with them!). One day I said to this class of thirty youngsters: "What do you think about when you think about God?" Some of

them said this, some of them said that. One little fellow turned to me and replied: "What do I think about when I think about God? Well, (Dummy...) what else would I possibly think about when I think about God, but the One who made the Earth, the One who is beyond everything else...God...There is no other, just God."

There are two frames of reference which people use in our time to describe God: either He is a constant companion, or a faraway idea. Some people make Him kind of a "Chatty Cathy" sort of thing, you know. "My buddy God", like, (and maybe I alone), I can call Him to my side anytime I need Him, just like that! Well, God is present, but we must be careful. You cannot belittle Him into your being your waiting servant, or comrade in conversational arms. He does not respond to your beck and call. It should be the other way around...

And yet, if you go too far the other way, as many have, you end up with a God who is so austere, so distant, so out-of-touch as Karl Barth once said, "Totaliter Aliter", "totally other"...This form of God you cannot approach. Over the years, people have brought the saints to intercede for us with that faraway God. We, being plain little people, could never approach the Almighty directly. What, or whom, do you think about, when you say: "God"?

I was once told the story by H. Ray Shear of the little fellow who was in his room one night, and he was afraid because it was dark. His mother came in to reassure him (Being afraid of the dark, I can identify with the story). His mother said: "Now, you don't have to be afraid, you see, because God is here with you. He is

everywhere. (He is right there beside you in the pew, right? All the empty seats are filled by God. There aren't very many of them, thank God!). She told her little son: "You do not need to be afraid, because God is right here with you in the bedroom." Would you care to guess what he said? "I know that, Mom, I know that...But I want a God with skin on His face." I want a God I can talk to...I want a God that I can listen to...I want to be able to see Him, to touch Him, to watch Him, to feel Him...I want to know what He is like...

We all want Him near, not to grope mysteriously around in Heaven somewhere, outside of time and space. We Christian people are privileged to have what many religions do not - a God who is a person. Not some God out there beyond, but a God who comes to Earth in the form of a man, Jesus Christ, who was just as we are. He came as not just some of God, not just a portion of God...not even, as some theologians say, all of God which can be reduced to the form of man: but God Himself came to Earth! God is with us! We do not have to wonder about what He is like. We know what He is like. He is loving, and kind, and good, and He cares about the poor. He cares about little children...He cares about those in trouble. When we say: "God Bless America", we are referring to that One who is active in the affairs of men, who cares about us and our nation (as all nations). When we say: "God Bless America", He replies: "I am there (here) in the middle of it...I can indeed bless it, and I will!" It is yours to be faithful as we go.

II. "Bless"...Now we turn to the question: what does the word "Bless" actually mean? Well,

Well, originally again there is a mixed and peculiar etymology to it. It is something I struggled with for a long time this past week, trying to condense it to a manageable paragraph or two, so that I could give it to you in a way that we could share together, and take it with us when we go. Everybody understands "Bless", do we not?

Originally, the word "bless" meant a blood sacrifice. Remember when the Jews covered their doorways with the blood of the lamb of the Passover, and the Angel of Death did not visit their homes, as it did to the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. That was "bless" in its original meaning. To "bless" a place meant that some great sacrifice had taken place, and the blood of that sacrifice made sacred whatever places it touched. To bless was to sanctify with the shedding of blood.

Then it was translated into English from the Latin word "Benedictus" (or the Greek word "Eulegein"), both of which also meant to "praise", "to do well by". "Eulogize" is a word that is directly transliterated from the same source.

"Bless" came to have a wide range of meanings. Long ago, my mother used to have in our (her) kitchen a little sign which read: "Bless this Mess". It is long since gone. In England, they say: "Bless my soul"... "Bless you", we say to each other. "God Bless you" is a common salutation on parting. It can have a wide variety of meanings.

One original meaning was "Sacrifice". Another, at the beginning of the Old Testament, also meant literally that something has been transferred, given. When Jacob's hand went on to his grandson's head in what is called the cross-over blessing, he was imparting a blessing

itself...when Isaac formerly blessed Jacob instead of Esau (Remember when mother Rebekah fooled the father, who was blind. She switched the children around. She put a hairy goatskin on the arm of the younger son, and the poor old man, not knowing that it was Jacob, not Esau, blessed the wrong one). Well, you feel like saying: "For goodness sakes, Isaac, take it back, after all, it is only a "blessing". Why don't you just revoke it, and start all over?

But he couldn't, because it was as literal as if a curse had been placed by an ancient voodoo magician, the one who, in making an image of the cursed one and shoved a needle into it, it was irreversible. Or like when they said about the Kennedys, when all those troubles were perplexing the Kennedy clan: "There is an Irish curse put upon them", right? And once it is put there, they believed it could not be taken back.

Then, as the Old Testament proceeds (and we better, too, if we hope to finish), it next came to have a symbolic meaning. Nothing really happens when I put my hand on your head, but it stands for the actual "Blessing". One day my father put his hand on my head, and then on my shoulder, to wish me well as I went off to school. It probably conveyed no tangible benefit, but it was a literal, tangible blessing. It meant a lot to me! If somebody puts his hand on you and says: "You're all right, I wish you well", somehow the touch of that hand conveys its own presence and meaning. Or, if on greeting you, I shake your hand, or hug you, the sense of touch conveys a blessing (Are you listening?).

Finally, in the Bible, "Blessing" came to have a variant meaning. God could offer the blessing,

but you do not have to take it (Did you hear that?). Far from Isaac's hand on the head of Jacob, which was irrevocable, the Bible came to teach that God can offer a blessing to you, as His child, but you can say (In symbol or in fact): "Get your hand off me, I don't want it!" The saddest situations in the world come when a parent wants to bless a child, and the child will not accept it. I see it happening time after time. Sometimes the child wants to bless the parent, too, and the parent will not accept it. They are too proud.

To refuse to accept a blessing is a terrible insult to the one who offers it. So it was said in ancient Israel that God continued to offer them a blessing but, as Hosea in particular says it, the people refused it. God said: "Look, I nurtured you when you were a little child, I held you. I taught you how to walk and how to sing, and how to read, and how to live, and how to dream, and now that you are an adult, you have forgotten me. I really want to bless you, I offer it. But I will not violate your right to refuse it."

If I know any secrets to the problems of the people of the world, it is right there. The blessings of God and Christ are offered to each and all of us. And, for reasons unknown to me, some people refuse to accept the blessing (How can you be so dumb?). Well, the blessing of God, meaning that everything good that He can offer you is there, is what we mean by "Bless", to an individual or to a nation.

I talked to a man this last week, who has had a terrible three months. It was discovered that he has cancer. It will be a long road to recovery, short of the miracles of God, or short of some treatment which he has not yet discovered. It is a really difficult, difficult time. The

longer we talked, the more invigorated I became. He said: "I never realized before what I have. I never really knew my blessings until I thought maybe I was going to lose them. It took an illness to do it, but I have finally accepted the blessing of God." Quit running away from the blessing! God...Bless..

III. "America"...God bless who? America. This third word should have been easy. I was going to finish this one off in half an hour, and get back to work, but I could not do it. It took me an enormous amount of time to try to find out the origin of the word "American". Now, everybody knows it was named for Amerigo Vespucci, or Americus Vespucius as we Anglicize it. He was a great explorer, right? He got the country named for him, right? I remembered that way in the back of my mind, but I wanted to know how it happened, and when we say "God Bless America", what or who or where is "America". We are not blessing Amerigo Vespucci. We are asking God to bless a land, or an idea, or a people.

So, away I went, back into the library stacks, in and out of the various dictionaries and reference books. Finally, I came across a scholar with a familiar name to me, Samuel Elliott Morrison. His book "European Discovery of America" tells a little story of Amerigo Vespucci (Now relax, you cannot get this kind of thing in most churches).

Amerigo Vespucci was in fact an "Explorer", quote unquote. He was born in Florence. He became a self-appointed navigator. He was a friend of the Medicis. Of course, that would help, because the Medicis were the wealthy power people of the world back then. You did not do anything unless the Medici family said you could.

So, Amerigo wasn't dumb...he knew what bread was buttered where. He became good friends particularly with Lorenzo de Medici. He became the outfitter of their ships and the ships of other merchants and explorers. He even outfitted the ships of Columbus. It is in the record that Columbus praised Amerigo Vespucci for his fair dealings with provisions for the Santa Maria.

Then, somehow, it becomes a long story. Amerigo Vespucci, let's say, inveigled one of the captains of a ship into allowing him to be the navigator. Now the only problem was, Dr.Morrison said, Amerigo did not know how to navigate a ship. And, if you were heading out into the open sea, and in those days they thought the earth is flat, and that they will fall off the edge...I mean you would want a good navigator before you started out, right? The captain was not dumb either. So, he got another, proper navigator, and slipped a few tools of the trade to Amerigo, because he was financing the operation. When Vespucci returned, he wrote journal without even mentioning the captain's name! Backdating his voyage two years, it turned out that he discovered America, not Columbus! (Can you imagine such a thing?!) Others disagree with Dr.Morrison, but there is more than a kernel of truth to the story.

But he got away with it. There was criticism from the beginning, but he was able to promote himself. He wrote beautiful stories about the "New World", as he called it. Columbus had written dry journals, which were, and are, a bore to read. Amerigo Vespucci told all about the difficulties he encountered. He told about the "personal" (quote unquote) practices of the native women and men (a forerunner of Playboy). He wrote of the marvelous flora and fauna...

I mean it was the most interesting kind of material published in the early sixteenth century. Everybody read it, of course, and his fame enlarged.

So Amerigo became very popular. "Novus Mundus", the New World, was published in forty different languages, and all over the world went the fame of the man who had fibbed and fabricated the story. There is no other way to say it! He had not been there, and when he did go, it was two years after Columbus had already returned.

Then came the final confirmation. Just at that time, Ptolemy's Geography of the World, a basic text in the Middle Ages, was being updated for re-publication. In charge of it was a man named Muller. In the revision, he penned in the outline of South America. It had never been on the map before, right? Because it had only recently been discovered...Almost in jest, he wrote on the new territory A-M-E-R-I-C-A, after guess who? The new map was circulated all over the known world at that time, and before very long, even though it was generally known that Amerigo was a Vespucci come lately, the new world came to be called "America".

Well, now, you might be thinking: "What's the Reverend doing standing up there teasing us about that for?" Right? It has absolutely nothing to do with my nation, or with God's blessing, or with the Gospel, or even with Thanksgiving. Let me tell you why I elaborated all this...then, gratefully, we will finish.

You see, the word "America" originally was affixed to South America. The name presently

is used for all of the territory from the southernmost tip of South America, on up through the Islands, on up to the furthest reaches in the North. It includes the Eskimos, the original Indians, and back on down to the Aztecs and the native Americans. It includes the blacks who came up this way, and down to the places in Columbia, where a village was covered in volcanic ash and lava, and up into Mexico City, where a giant earthquake has torn out the lives and hearts of people. "America" is the name which encompasses the slums of every portion of the continent north and south, into Guatemala, and Nicaragua, where there is the difficulty of war and battle.

America is more than the place bound by the Atlantic and Pacific and the parallel points to the north and to the south...America is far more than that. It is an idea which in God's time brought, and brings a whole lot of people together...

And when we say "God Bless America", we are not asking for something for you and me alone. We are part of the intended blessing, to be sure. But God responds: "All of these... past, present and future...They are all my people, and always will be. I will bless them all. And, I want you to bless them all. I want all of them to receive the blessing, the one which comes to them in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Whether they be Eskimos, or South Americans, or aborigines, or Columbians, or Mexicans, or whatever, whoever, wherever, whyever...my blessing is offered to them.

Some years ago, when the riots were going on in this country, long before the more recent Liberty City episode, I was in Scotland with a

man who told me that when he had been a boy, he always wanted to come to America. "I wanted to go out and claim the dream that day in 1968", he said. "Now that I see what has happened to it, I'm glad I did not go." I don't know what he thinks now, in 1986, but I am glad that God has brought me here, and I am glad that you are here to help me. I am glad that the hands of Jesus Christ are there to take us and bless us and lead us and guide us and guard us and keep us...from now until the day when His Kingdom truly comes on Earth, which pray God might be soon, who knows? The time is His, right? not ours. For now and evermore. Amen.