

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Mighty Acts of God: Putting it in Drive”
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Exodus 16:1-8; Matthew 8:18-22

So, what is America’s greatest pastime? Is it baseball? Is it football? Is it Wheel of Fortune? Well if you voted for any of those, or some other, I want to offer an alternative. And the alternative is the “If Only” game. What is the If Only game? It is the game we all play when we say, “If only I…” and then you fill in the blank. If only I had bought Amazon ten years ago? If only I had learned Spanish? If only I had studied a little harder. If only I was a little taller, faster, smarter, better looking…you get my point. The wonderful thing about the If Only game is that everybody can play it. You don’t need any special equipment. You don’t even need lessons. You can just play it. In fact, how many of you have ever played the If Only game? And for those of you who haven’t, you can do it now. If only I had played the If Only game. So why does this game matter this morning. It matters because it was the game the Israelites were playing when they came out of Egypt.

To be sure that we are all on the same page, let’s recap. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. Things got so bad that they cried out for help. God heard their cry and sent Moses and Aaron to work for their release. Pharaoh was not so keen on letting them go so God, through Moses, brought on the Egyptians a series of plagues, the last one being so terrible that the people were set free. As we heard last week, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his troops after God’s people. With a mighty hand God defeated the Egyptians and the Israelites traveled into the wilderness to a nice oasis, where they camped for a while. Everyone still with me? Good. We pick up the story this morning with the Israelites leaving the oasis and traveling into a food desert…literally, a food desert. They assume that they will starve to death, and it is in that moment when they begin to play the If Only game. “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread. For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” If only…it is an ancient game.

Again, you may still be wondering why it matters that they were playing the If Only game. The answer is that the If Only game can cause people to take their lives out of drive and put them in another gear. I know that sounds cryptic, but bear with me. When God set the people free from slavery, God did not do so because these people were nicer, kinder or better looking than any other people, but because God had something for them to do. God had a task for them to accomplish. And that task was to bless the world; something which God wanted them to do from the Land of Promise. It was to be the base from which this blessing would flow. For that to happen however, the Israelites needed to avoid getting stuck in the wilderness and instead proceed directly to the Land of Promise. The problem with the If Only game, as I said, is that it could cause them to either reverse their direction or to simply hunker down and not move at all. Either of which would be disastrous for God’s world-wide plan of blessing.

First, the If Only game can cause people to put themselves into reverse. This is what is happening in the story this morning. “If only you had left us to die in Egypt.” This type of If Only game is one that breeds nostalgia. If only things were like they once were. If only we could go back to the way life once was, then everything would be wonderful. All they could remember were non-existent pots filled with meat and the goodies of life. They had forgotten that things had been so terrible that they had cried out for deliverance. On a deeper level though, the problem with this kind of If Only game for the Israelites was that

if they went back to Egypt, then the blessing would not flow out into the world. It would once again be trapped in slavery. Unfortunately, the church has often played this If Only game; if only we could go back to the way things were life would be perfect. We can see this in the Nashville Statement, where a group of conservative pastors got together and issued a statement declaring that any church that accepted LGBTQ persons into membership was not a Christian Church. What they were doing was telling those of us who are fully inclusive congregations, if only you went back to excluding people, back to taking back the blessing, then we will include you in our community. If only you put yourself in reverse, then everything will be fine; except for the fact that the blessing, would no longer flow to all.

Second, the If Only game can put us in neutral. This is what the Israelites were about to do. Returning to our story, the Israelites were going to be fed. God would give them manna in the morning and quail in the afternoons. They would also be given clothing that never wore out. Suddenly life was not going to be so bad. However, the problem here was that when they reached the edge of the Land of Promise and were told there were giants and powerful nations ahead, they said, “If only we could stay here we would be safe. If only you didn’t make us go any farther we will be just fine.” They were happy to stay where they were. Again, this is what white churches said to Dr. Martin Luther King in Birmingham. If only you will let things stay as they are, we will all be fine. Sure, we know that blacks are not treated well, but if only you just stop here, then one day, someday, we will do something about it, but just let things stay as they are. If only you put yourself in neutral, then everything will be fine; except for the fact that the blessing, would no longer flow to all.

These last couple of weeks show us why we need to be in drive. We watched as one more time a man with mental illness accessed and used a weapon to kill innocent men, women and children. We watched once again as twenty-six young women trying to escape from Africa to Europe drown in the Mediterranean. We watched once again as people used hate speech to demonize “the other.” We watched at Alcott as dedicated teachers struggled with overcrowded classrooms and often hungry children. In other words, watched a world still in need of the blessing of God. Still in need knowing the love of God as poured out in Jesus. Still in need of compassion and support. Still in need.

In the face of all of this, I want to let you know that you, that we, are a congregation in drive. We are a launching pad for blessing here and around the world. We are a launching pad because we teach our children and youth about the love of God and help them become kind and compassionate followers of Jesus. We are a launching pad for blessing through our support of Alcott, children in Foster Care and the Ruth Ellis Center. We are a launching pad because we offer our building without cost to a counseling center and an organization that supports children and adults with special needs. We are a launching pad because we serve the homeless and the hungry. We are a launching pad because we support missionaries who work to prevent human trafficking and child marriage. We are a church in drive that is making a difference in the world.

Even so we are still susceptible to the If Only game. As we look at the needs of the world we could still say, if only someone else would feed the families at Alcott. If only the government would solve all our problems. If only someone else would show compassion and care for the homeless. If only we had more people, more resources, more...maybe we should just shift into neutral and coast. Yet God may be leading you to show us the next place where we need to be in drive. Yet God may be opening your eyes to a need that we might meet. So, don’t play the If Only game. If God is leading you, come and see me and say, here is where we need to be in drive, and we will see what we can do about it.

Keeping it in drive. This is our challenge. And my challenge to you is this, to ask yourselves, how am I helping to keep this community in drive, that we might keep launching God’s blessings out into the world.