

How’s social distancing going for you? Today I’m feeling very “socially distant” from all of you. That’s a good thing—at least the distance itself is good. The feeling is not so good. Lately I’m thinking of another question too: Which are we doing more of, handwashing or hand wringing? I discourage handwringing; I encourage handwashing. A Bible verse that has been on my mind these last few weeks is from Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “*For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ*” (2:5). I’m praying today for your “*morale*” (and mine). I’m praying for “*the firmness of your faith in Christ*” (and mine). Keep the faith, Christian friends!

Even though the virus has changed Easter, Easter is the day that changed everything. Easter is the reason we worship on Sunday rather than any of the other six days; the first day of the week rather than the Sabbath day when the Lord rested. Because of Easter, our worship life is reoriented toward the rising of the sun, rather than its setting.

Easter Sunday is a day for exclamation points! If there is any day we need to pull out all the stops (as the organists say), it is this day. Resurrection Day is a day of light and laughter. It’s not about candy (even though I love peanut butter eggs) or flowers (even though they make the chancel beautiful) or making this year’s worship experience like what you see on TV. It’s about the attitude we bring to worship.

Exuberance is a good word to describe Easter. Joy is a word that speaks of the overflowing nature of God’s gift of grace to us that is this day of celebration. That’s what we’re seeking today. It’s not about the trappings. It’s about the heart.

Speaking at a coronavirus task force briefing on Monday vice president Mike Pence said, “While this is a week of heartache it’s also a week of hope.” Doesn’t that characterize every Holy Week? There’s *heartache* and then there’s *hope*. I wish this room was filled with the voices of children today. I wish they were on those chancel steps to hear about the EGG-CITEMENT of Easter. I wish they were here to sit and wiggle and move and bring light and life to the whole congregation. I miss them more than you know. I also miss the lilies, tulips and hyacinths, but not near as much as I miss the children.

The story from John 20 should not have been *just* read. It should have been proclaimed; it should have been sung; it should have been shouted. Wait a minute. Let’s shout right now! *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!* If you have any drama in your souls, shout it again. And hang on every word of John 20: *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance...Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!”*

Psalm 134, the last song of accents, is an apt response to this astounding good news: *Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and [bless] the LORD. May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who is the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Eugene Peterson says, “There are two words translated *blessed* in our Bibles. One is *ashre*, which describes the having-it-all-together sense of well-being that comes when we are living in tune with creation and redemption. It is what Psalm 1 announces. The other word is *berakah*. It describes what God does to us: he enters into covenant with us, he pours out his own life for us, he shares the goodness of his

Spirit, the vitality of his creation, the joys of redemption. He empties himself among us, and we get what he is. *That is blessing.*

God gets down on his knees among us, gets on our level and shares himself with us. He does not reside far off and send us diplomatic messages; he kneels among us. That posture is what defines what we know of God as good news—God shares himself generously and graciously. Whichever form the *blessing* takes, it implies an exchange of the contents of the soul. God enters into our need, he anticipates our goals, he “gets into our skin” and understands us better than we do ourselves. Everything we learn about God from Scripture and in Christ tells us that he knows what it is like to change a diaper for the thirteenth time in the day, to see a report over which we have worked long and carefully gather dust on somebody’s desk for weeks and weeks, to find our teaching treated with scorn or indifference by children and youth, to discover that the integrity and excellence of our work has been overlooked and another person’s shoddy work rewarded with a promotion.”

But God comes to our level and meets us where we are; God sticks with us through hard times and good times, sharing his life with us in grace and peace. And because God blesses us, *we bless God*. We respond with that which we have received. We participate in the process that God has initiated. We who are *blessed*, learn to *bless*. The people who learn what it is like to receive the *blessing*, people who travel the way of faith experiencing the ways of grace in all kinds of weather and over every kind of terrain, become good at *blessing*.

“There is no better summarizing and concluding word in all of Scripture than *blessing*,” says Peterson. It describes what we most prize in God’s dealing with us and what is most attractive when we evaluate our way of living. Every service of worship concludes with a *benediction*, literally, a good word. Psalm 134 features a good word in a form that we could call an invitational command: “*Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and [bless] the LORD.*”

The people who first sang this song had been traveling roads that led to Jerusalem. Now they had arrived and were at the temple to worship God in festival celebration. Some would have been on the road for days, some for weeks, and in some instances for months. Today, we’re still on the road before us, and it may be quite some time before we arrive once again at our destination—with the virus in the rear view mirror. What should we feel? What should we do?

Read one way, Psalm 134 is an invitation: “Come, bless the LORD.” The great promise of being in Jerusalem is that all may join in the rich worship at the temple. Come and join in. **Don’t** be shy. **Don’t** hold back. **Don’t** be too Presbyterian when you worship God! Besides, you’re in your living room!

The great festival of Easter is not a time for holding back or being too stiff or reserved. Today is Easter—the day that defines us as followers of Jesus. Every Sunday is a little Easter, so this Easter Sunday should be the day that sets the tone for the rest of the year and the rest of our lives as the people of God. But it has a very odd tone, doesn’t it. It’s got a very strange feel this year, hasn’t it?

Karl Barth was one of the great theologians of all time, says Eugene Peterson. But the really attractive thing about him is that he was a man who *blessed* God. His mind was massive, his learning immense, his theological output staggering. He wrote a six-million-word, seven-thousand-page, twelve-volume

dogmatics plus forty or fifty other books and several hundred learned articles. Impressive as that is, what is far more impressive, is that he lived with deepest gratitude.

Always and everywhere Karl Barth was responding to God's grace. He never took himself seriously, but always took God seriously, and was full of cheerfulness, exuberance and *blessing*.

Once Barth was on a bus in Basel, the Swiss city in which he lived and taught for many years. A man came and sat beside him, a tourist. Barth struck up a conversation, "You are a visitor, yes? And what do you want to see in our city?" The man said, "I would like to see the great theologian Karl Barth. Do you know him?" "Oh, yes," said Barth, "I shave him every morning." The man went away satisfied, telling his friends that he had met Karl Barth's barber.

Because he refused to take himself too seriously and decided to take God very seriously, he neither burdened himself or those around him with his own pride, sin, or self-righteousness. Instead, his life was lived like the 134th Psalm, by the lifting up of hands, with the brightness of *blessing*.

Blessing is our **destination**. *Resurrection* is our **destination**. And that which is our **destination** influences everything that takes place along the way.

As Catherine of Siena said, "All the way to heaven is heaven."

A joyful end requires a joyful journey. Bless the Lord this Easter Day!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!