Sermon for Easter Sunday

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Saturday, April 21, 2019
Title: Blellow

A couple years ago, when she was not quite two years old, my daughter began noticing and naming the colors all around her. My husband and I – like all first-time parents - delighted in this discovery. We’d ask her what colors the markers were as she took them out of the box, what colors the flowers were as we went on an afternoon walk, what color her clothes were as she got dressed in the morning, (or at any of the other seven times a day she decided to change). Eventually, playing with paint, she stumbled upon the miracle of mixing colors. Elmo offered a catchy song about the primary three, which she quickly memorized, and soon she could readily tell you not only what color was at hand but what red and blue or yellow and red would make.

One afternoon around this time, as she settled into a seat at her art table and picked up a crayon, I asked her what we’d get if we combined blue and yellow. Without looking up, she responded confidently, “blellow.” Over the course of the next few days as I shared the story with friends and family, the overwhelming response was, “she’s not wrong!” And that, I think, it what made it so wonderful: blue and yellow do make “blellow.” I mean, in a sense. She managed to answer my question in a way that was both technically correct and a complete and total surprise to me.

There is something in this exchange that is not at all unlike how we relate to God and how God relates to us. We come to God with our prayers, our hopes, and our dreams, maybe adding a “thy will be done” at the end of our petitions but still pretty clear about what we want and need, and God responds, “blellow.” God responds with something we don’t at all expect; something we aren’t even sure we asked for; something that doesn’t seem, at least at first, to make much sense.

Sometimes when we get this sort of response, we’re delighted, like I was with my daughter. We spend weeks clinging to an unfulfilling but well-paying job at a company we long since stopped loving because there are bills to pay and mouths to feed, all the while praying to be freed from this soul-crushing routine. A surprise promotion, we suggest. A call from a head-hunter who says you’re the perfect fit for that highly desirable position that just opened up with a competitor, we pray. And then a knock on the office door comes, and you’re let go after all, and
the very same day as you drive home to tell your husband you check the mail, and in it is an encouraging response from a publisher to whom you sent your manuscript months before on a total whim. You’d actually forgotten about it, having long since exhausted your capacity to wonder if you’d ever hear back. It was terrible, and then it so good you wouldn’t even have thought to ask for it. The worst thing – getting sober, getting divorced, falling and failing – somehow blossoms into the best: a future more beautiful than you’d ever imagined.

But sometimes when we get a surprising response from God, it’s a bitter pill. We were really attached to things as they were. We were really attached to our plans for the future. We were really clear on what we wanted and needed and whatever God has sent back across the net is decidedly not what we had in mind. I mean, who does God think God is? We needed a cure, an answer, a miracle. Not another question, not more silence, not a softer heart. Not this “blellow” nonsense.

I figure this must be how many people felt in the time of Jesus. Remember that for the Jewish community in and around Jerusalem, this was a period of tremendous disruption and distress. The children of Israel were living under the military occupation of Rome. A puppet government, filled with figures like Herod and Pilate, was centered in the Holy City, but the religious elites were colluding with the Empire and, as usually happens, most people – particularly those on the margins – were suffering terribly. They were overwhelmed, overpowered, and afraid, keenly reminded, no doubt, of the calamity that had befallen them just a few centuries before when the Babylonians had invaded, ultimately destroying the Temple and taking most of the nation of Israel into exile. In an attempt to avoid another diaspora, the people had settled into a tenuous peace, but the situation was far from ideal. The political reality was dismal enough, but for a people who believed themselves the chosen of God, the strength of their monarchy – the integrity of their autonomy – said something not only about their place in the world but their relationship with God.

It was in the context of this tremendous instability that many people began turning to their faith for an answer; turning heavenward in the hope of changing their earthly circumstance. Some people doubled down in their observance of Torah. Others paid scrupulous attention to the elaborate system of sacrifices offered at the Temple. Still others, like the Pharisees described in the Gospels, became obsessed with purity. And there was a definite rise in Jewish apocalypticism. Now this was not a widespread phenomenon – certainly not every Jew in the
Second Temple period was actively anticipating the arrival of a messiah: someone to conquer Israel’s foes and set them free – but for many this idea appealed mightily and led to the rise of several sects like the Essenes, and those gathered in Qumran. And because the fellowship that gathered around Jesus - this traveling teacher, this prophetic preacher, this wandering healer – was largely made of people on the margins, people who experienced the Roman occupation as particularly crushing, they were likely even more desperate for change than your average Joe or Jane and more likely to see in their friend hints of the son of David, the messiah, the anointed one: he who would triumph over their enemies, restoring Israel’s place in the world and reconciling them to God once more.

So, while all these various groups had different perspectives on their current calamity and how to get out of it, they also had more in common than they might like to admit. They were all looking to God for help. They were all praying for deliverance. They were all waiting for God to save them. And here is where the uniquely Christian thread of this story emerges, because we make this wild, bold, ridiculous claim that God did hear them. Not only that, but God responded. God sent a savior, a messiah … just not in the way they expected. Not in the way anyone expected. Not in a way that mapped nicely onto the job description they had in mind. People came to God asking for liberation and God gave them a baby. They came to God asking for deliverance and God appeared among them as a storyteller. They came to God asking for a military genius and got someone so unfamiliar with the political machine that he got himself arrested and killed by the very empire he was supposed to defeat. They came saying, “will you make a way for us?” and God said, “blellow.” A true answer. A real answer. But not the answer they expected or, for the most part, wanted.

And that made it hard to recognize in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection an even more profound gift than the one they’d been hoping and praying for. After all, Jesus didn’t come into the world just to free the people of ancient Israel from Rome. He came into the world to free humanity – all people, everywhere – regardless of class or color or creed - of the power of darkness and death. The problem wasn’t that God didn’t hear the people’s prayers. It’s that what they were asking for was too small. God had a bigger and bolder dream for them, which made it, ironically, easy to miss.

Now it is true that we don’t always get to see how God is working in our midst. God’s timeline is too long or our attention span too short. And are plenty of times when it might look
like we come up empty handed in prayer, except for the consolation and comfort of simply slowing down, naming our sadness and our sorrows, acknowledging our hopes and intentions. But there are a whole lot of moments that escape our attention because we’re not sure where to look or what to look for. Like in today’s Gospel, when the women – the first to experience the resurrection! who discovered the empty tomb and were told by angels that Jesus has been risen - when they finally get to the disciples to tell them this incredible, miraculous news, do the disciples jump for joy? No. They don’t believe them. It seems to them an idle tale. Which is precisely why we gather here: to remind ourselves of the surprising nature of God, and to open ourselves up to a different way of looking at the world, to new possibilities.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, an expert on Jewish mysticism, reflects on popular metaphors for God, comparing two that are common in both Judaism and Christianity.1 In the first, one large circle exists above many small circles. The large circle is God; the small circles are us. When we are operating out of this metaphor, God doesn’t look so much like a circle as an old man on a throne with a long, flowing beard, and a stern, generally disapproving expression. This is the God we turn heavenward to face, to plead with, to pray to. Even if we intellectually refute this image, it has been operative for such a long time that it can rear its ugly head in our hearts.

An alternative metaphor involves the same large circle, representing God, only this time all the little circles exist within the larger one. Not only is there no distance between God and humanity – we are part of the inner life of God. This is the universal, all-encompassing, incredible truth Jesus affirmed and revealed in his life, death, and resurrection. God is not out there judging and ruling. God is here, among us, within us, between us, as we participate in the very life of the divine. And this matters, particularly on Easter morning, because if we are stuck in the first metaphor – if that is limiting our imagination – we might get confused and think the crucifixion and resurrection are only events that happened 2000 years ago to Jesus. Or even that the resurrection is only about what happens to us after we die. When the truth is, because we are also a part of the life of God, this is not just Jesus’ story: it’s ours. This didn’t just happen to him – it happens to us, and it keeps happening to us. God keeps dreaming a bigger and better and bolder dream on our behalf. God keeps turning the world upside down and inside out. God keeps

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defying the rules we thought we were operating under. God keeps responding in ways that take
our breath away, bringing hope out of fear, joy out of sorry, and life out of death.

Happy Easter, my friends. May we go forth from this place prepared to be delighted,
amazed, and made new by a God who is eternally full of surprises. Amen.