

BEING ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF A CLOSING DOOR

Sermon, August 30, 2020

Texts: Exodus 1:8-20; Romans 12

The Germans have a unique word that, like many compound German words, doesn't quite have a corresponding word in English. The word is called "*Torschlusspanik*," which literally means "*shut-door-panic*" ... it's the fear, the anxiety, of being on the wrong side of a closing door. Jacob had a bad case of *Torschlusspanik* in a portion of the Joseph story we skipped over found in Genesis 46. You remember the story: There was a famine in Palestine, and there was food in Egypt; through a long chain of events one of Jacob's sons, Joseph, had become prime minister of Egypt and he has now invited all his family to come join him in Egypt to escape the famine. However, Jacob wasn't sure. I'm sure he wrestled with this decision with all the heartache and anxiety of any elderly person who is contemplating a move that may be permanent, so he laments to the Lord (*in the lyrics of the eighties punk rock band Clash*), "*So you got to let me know, Should I stay or should I go? (Levi made it popular in a commercial a decade later ... no relation to Levi, one of Jacob's twelve sons)*. "*Should I stay here, or should I go with my sons and relocate to Egypt? There's food there, Joseph will take care of us, but ... maybe I'm just too old to go. This is my home; this is the land of my fathers. This is the Promised Land, I've a responsibility to stay here, this is where I belong ... if I move now, I'll probably never see this home again.*" God comes to Jacob and says, in so many words, "*Jacob, Jacob.*" *Don't be afraid, it will be all right. You'll be on the right side of a closing door. For there I will be with you and I will make of you a great nation.*" So Jacob and all his family go, and the Israelites prosper in Egypt for many years.

The word "CRISIS" might be the closest English equivalent to "*Torschlusspanik*." Crisis is defined in the dictionary as (1) a time when a difficult or important decision must be made. Synonyms: a critical point, turning point, crossroads, watershed, moment of truth, zero hour, point of no return, Rubicon (*"crossing the Rubicon" has been a metaphor for an irreversible decision to forge ahead ever since Julius Caesar crossed that border river in 49 BC and invaded Rome, precipitating the Roman Civil War*). The word itself originates from the Greek word 'krisis' (κρίσις) which loosely translated means "decisive moment" ... a time to decide (*the verb form is "krino" κρίνω which means "pick out, choose, decide."*) Interestingly, this Greek word κρίσις is also commonly translated in our Bibles as the English word "judgment." So, a Greek word with a core meaning of "decision" is often translated into English as "judgment" because the two words are so closely linked. After all, a judgment *is* a decision (*and just as a quick aside, for this is really a sermon in itself, but there is a difference between being judgmental and making judgments. We are not to be judgmental; however, we ARE to make judgments! We must make decisions ... especially as the proverbial door is about to shut. We must discern, e.g., between what is right and wrong, good and evil, and so on. In fact, not to make judgments can be a moral evil in itself!*) At root, then, a CRISIS is a decision point, a point where one has to make a decision.

Interestingly, *Torschlusspanik* is the term the Germans often use to describe what we would call a midlife crisis ... a midlife crisis is defined as an emotional crisis of identity and self-confidence that can occur in middle age; which Wikipedia defines as "typically 45-65 years old" (*so, I guess I'm not middle aged anymore*). A midlife crisis often results from regret over decisions made in previous times of "crisis;" bad choices have a way of accumulating and affecting everything else in the course of one's lifetime ... unfortunately, those undergoing midlife crises tend to make more bad decisions which will only compound their despair. Well, we read about a mid-WIFE crisis in our Old Testament reading! The setting is after Jacob and Joseph had passed away, the Israelites are greatly increasing in number, a new Pharaoh comes to power. The Israelites are not treated kindly under this Pharaoh. The king of Egypt forced a crisis upon these Hebrew midwives which I'm sure caused a sense of *torschlusspanik*. He commanded the midwives to kill any baby boys born to the Hebrew women. The faithful midwives made a crisis decision to resist that command, though they had no guarantee what the outcome would be. However, they decided they wanted to be on what they sincerely believed was God's side of the door. And you know the story; Moses was one of living results of their disobedience to the Egyptian king, as you can read in the next chapter. We are told in today's reading, "*God was kind to the midwives ... and because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own.*" They WERE on the right side of that closing door; God blessed them for their faithfulness, and through the faithfulness exhibited in this "midwife crisis," Moses and others were safely brought into that world.

Our world needs people like those Hebrew midwives, people who, in times of crises, in times of decision, will do what is right, despite powerful influences to do otherwise. That's the right side of the closing door. Let me ask a rhetorical question: Are we Hebrew midwives? Are we the people in our neighborhoods or our workplaces or our homes who will make right decisions, people of good judgment who personify higher things, higher values, higher allegiances? Does our Christian commitment clearly set us apart on critical issues? Are

we people who, as Paul writes in Romans, won't let the world around us squeeze us into its mold? Watching the political conventions these past weeks, I was impressed by what one candidate's daughter said about her father. Now I know there is a lot of political polarization these days, and I don't cite this as a political pundit or advocate, but when Ivanka Trump said on Friday night, "Washington DC did not change my father, my father changed Washington DC", I immediately thought about Paul's words ... "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold."

We are called by God to change our world, not to BE changed by it.

As mentioned earlier to the children, a thermostat is an instrument that determines the temperature of the environment around it. You set the thermostat, and it goes to work making sure that the climate around it is **transformed** to that set temperature. A *thermometer*, however, is a device that simply measures the temperature around it. It is an indicator, not a "setter." A thermometer does nothing to determine or influence or change that climate; it simply is a gauge reflecting or displaying what the climate already is. Too many good Christian people today are thermometers, people whose lives are simply a reflection of the climate around them. Do you know thermometer people? Thermometer people are the kind of people that if everybody in an environment is gossiping, well, they will gossip. If everybody around them stretches truth, or is not averse to lying, well, they will stretch the truth or tell a lie. If some people around will take a little money under the table or evade a tax, thermometer people will take a little money under the table or evade a tax. Again, thermometers reflect the climate around them. They do nothing to affect or change it.

Now, do you know a thermostat person? Do you know someone in whose presence you want to be and do your very best? Do you know people who just fill you with the desire and the determination to do better? Do you know people who elevate the climate and the atmosphere of a room just by being there? Someone around who you would not want to tell a crass joke, use foul language, badmouth others? Of course you do; you are surrounded by such people, many of you here this morning ARE such people. We all know people who, when we are with them or when we think of them, our spirit is lifted, our mood elevated, our determination to live better and more honorably and more consistently is just fired up! Such people have a THERMOSTATIC influence on our temperament. I believe God is looking for thermostats, not thermometers; people who will positively affect and even transform the climate around them ... and in so doing, make it much more pleasant and live-able for all. Well, our readings this morning show how to be thermostats in a thermometer-filled world, especially in times of crisis. In the little time remaining, I'd like to cite three quick principles from our second reading, Romans 12:

Principle 1: If we would be thermostats, don't let the world squeeze us into its mold. Paul says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may prove what is the will of God." In short, when faced with a "midwife crisis," choose what is right, choose to be on what you know to be God's side of the door! Believe and live out and stand for the things you've been taught by God. And by the way ... we'll never know just whose life we may be saving by our faithfulness, including our own.

Principle 2: If we would be thermostats, we need to make all our daily tasks intentional acts of worship. 12:1 -- "Therefore I urge you in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship." Everything we do, wherever we are, is an act of worship before God. We are to be consciously and constantly "on the altar" before God ... living sacrifices, as Paul puts it (as I heard one pastor put it, "The problem with living sacrifices is that they are always trying to crawl off the altar!") We are to do our daily tasks with such integrity, grace, determination, and love, that when people see us, they will be encouraged, they will be inspired, they will see something of God through us, and it will certainly affect the temperament. Even by just being considerate, extending a little friendship, going out of your way to do just one nice thing, or saying one good word, you can have a thermostatic influence on people, elevating their mood, their morale inspiring them to better living.

Principle 2: If we would be thermostats, we must overcome evil with good. Paul says, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another, repay no one evil for evil ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Overcome evil with good. The all-too-human tendency is to think, "Well, if somebody wrongs me, I'm going to get them." That's a thermometer reaction; that's reflecting, not improving, the surrounding environment. If we would have a thermostatic effect, we have to do what we can to try and overcome evil with good.

So, (1) don't let the world squeeze you into its mold, (2) make all your daily tasks acts of worship of the living God, and (3) work to overcome evil with good ... in short, live *thermostatically* ... and be on the right side of that door.