

“Gut Check”

Series: “In the beginning...”

Exodus 14:10-16, 21-29; Matthew 15: 21-28

The American Church has changed. Both scientific studies and our own personal experience tell us that Americans now “do” church differently. Congregations are more fluid and diverse. Denominational labels carry less and less influence. Here at Westminster, people mostly decide to unite with us not because we are Presbyterian, but because of our weekday school or youth groups or mission outreach. Many of us did not grow up Presbyterian, but have decided to become a part of this congregation because we believe it will help us live out our faith. And this ecumenical spirit very positively impacts our church as new ideas, viewpoints, and understandings are added to our community of faith.

And yet, as positive as it is, it also sometimes creates a little consternation when the traditions in which we grew up conflict with those that make us Presbyterian. Two places this can manifest itself are in weddings and funerals. We maintain specific orders of worship, or liturgy, for these services. And when someone wants to conduct them in the tradition of their former congregation or a wedding they attended for their best friend, they can become chagrined when we lovingly tell them we do it a certain way.

For instance, in both a wedding and funeral, the music is always religious. We don’t have anything against Brittany Spears or Madonna, or the Grateful Dead, but here the music must be about God. Also, at our funeral services, only the pastor speaks. And, at weddings, we do not add activities that do not carry theological significance.

Now, the reason for these guidelines is not that we are just old fuddy duddys, although we may be that. Rather, funerals and weddings are worship services. Their focus is God, not the bride and groom, nor the deceased. This doesn’t mean that we are saying what other churches do is wrong, but for us, the central element in any service is the worship of Almighty God.

Does the pastor say a few words about the deceased or the bride or groom? Yes, but in the context of the Christian faith. Whether it is a wedding, funeral or Sunday service, it is not about us, it is about God.

Now, I bring this up, because for the last 300 or so years, and especially the last 150, discussion of our scripture passage has often focused on how the miracle of Moses’ parting the Red Sea occurred. Most scholars agree the technically correct translation of this Hebrew text is not Red Sea, but Reed Sea. We know this area was filled with bodies of shallow water. Does that mean that when verse twenty-one says a strong east wind blew all night and dried the ground that the Israelites marched across a “sea of reeds?” Or was the sea’s division and consequent reforming a matter of low tide versus high tide? Or did the dim moon confuse the Egyptians? Or, for those of my generation, did it really look like

Charlton Heston standing before those gigantic walls of water in the movie, “The Ten Commandments?”

There is no shortage of opinions and interpretations of how it was possible for this event to take place. And it is not a bad thing to attempt to figure out what actually occurred in scriptural events. Throughout the Bible, God uses everyday elements of human life to accomplish His will. Jesus, born in a manger to a middle class family. Water for baptism, bread and wine for communion. In this episode, wind dries the land, mud clogs Egyptian wheels, sea water drowns Pharaoh’s army.

And yet, in all of these instances, like in a wedding or funeral, what is of primary significance is to see and understand that this is a direct intervention of Almighty God. The importance of the event, the miracle of the episode is not what or how the physical elements came into play, but that they did so at the direct instigation of God. Like in a worship service of any kind, the scripture’s focus is God.

The exodus from Egypt is the central act of the Old Testament. If you do not understand the exodus, you will not understand the Old Testament or Judaism. The event’s explanation is summed up in Moses’ words to the complaining Israelites: “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today...”

“Do not be afraid.” The same words the angel spoke to the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth. That day on the shores of Egypt, that night outside of Bethlehem, and here in this sanctuary, they carry the exact same meaning and comfort. “Do not be afraid.” God is still here, still on guard, still in the fight.

“...stand firm” because God is on our side, working on our behalf.

“...see the deliverance the Lord will accomplish for you today...” God is not only here, but actively seeking to deliver you from the evil attempting to overwhelm you.

Like the Israelites who saw water on one side of them and the Egyptian army on the other, it can look to us like we are surrounded by impossible choices. A struggling economy, bumpy marriages, angelic children who overnight become possessed teenagers, an inability to forgive or forget a momentary transgression, a physical ailment that will not or cannot heal. Everywhere we look we see either water or Egyptians. Yet, the promise from God to the Israelites and Jesus to us remains firm and continuing: “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.”

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was greatly influenced early in his career by a group of Moravians who were aboard his ship as he and his brother, Charles, were crossing from England to Georgia where they would do mission work. On the way, the ship became caught in a life threatening storm. Wesley himself feared for his life. But going below decks he discovered a group of Moravians, religious refugees from Central Europe and Germany praying and

singing hymns. The Moravians remained calm throughout the storm, continuing with their prayers and singing.

After the storm passed, Wesley questioned one of the Moravian men about the group's apparent calm. Wesley asked, "Were not even your women and children afraid of dying?" To which the man replied, "No, our women and children are not afraid to die."

Moses reminded the Israelites, and us, that we do not need to be afraid. God is here.

The Israelites are slaves in Egypt. God calls Moses to deliver His people from their bondage. After a series of plagues, especially the last killing all the first born in Egypt, human and animal, including Pharaoh's son, Pharaoh finally consents to allow the children of Israel to escape. Carrying Egyptian wealth, the Jews, following Moses, head for the Promised Land. Obeying God's directions, Moses leads the Israelites on a disjointed path that causes Pharaoh to believe they are half lost and easy pickings. The scripture says God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and the king decides to go get his slaves back.

With 600 hand-picked chariots, the stealth bombers of their day, the mighty Egyptian army advances toward the former slaves. With the sea in front of them and Pharaoh's chariots behind them, the people fall into a familiar pattern, they begin to whine and complain to Moses.

"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have brought us out here to die in the wilderness? Didn't we tell you to leave us alone in Egypt? Better to be slaves than to die out here in the middle of nowhere!"

The people had enjoyed watching the plagues irritate the Egyptians, liked it when they were freed from bondage, liked it when they confiscated Egyptian gold and jewels. But at the first sign of trouble, they were ready to run back to the way it was before.

The past always looks better than it was. Whenever I reminisce, I notice that I am always thinner, smarter, more mature, and have more hair. How easily we look for excuses to revert back to former ways. Obstacles make us want to immediately return to safe ground, previous methods of acting, thinking and believing. There is comfort in the familiar, but also an inability to grow, change, and move forward. The children of Israel, you and I, face the choice of reverting to former ways or with faith moving ahead to a new land of love, forgiveness, and Christ-like living.

One evening an old Cherokee man told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside every person. He said, "My son, the battle is between two 'wolves' inside us all. One wolf is Evil – It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

"The other wolf is Good – It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought for a minute, then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf wins?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Today, like the children of Israel as they stood beside the Reed Sea, we must decide whether to feed the wolf of complaining and a desire for the past, or the wolf of faith and the future.

“Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today...The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

In my mind, I likely see this scene differently from others. Moses has led these people out of grinding slavery. Through miraculous plagues God has illustrated His presence among the people, His intent and promise to bring them to a land of milk and honey. And though I surely understand their fear when they see the Egyptian army bearing down on them, I have to believe Moses was a little irritated. When the scripture reads that Moses said, “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still,” I see Moses saying, “The Lord will fight for you, now stand over there, shut up, and watch this!”

Of course, that is undoubtedly more me than Moses. But part of my interpretation is the truth that Israel is not saved because of her faith. The people aren’t displaying any faith in God. They’re ready to go back to Egypt and be slaves. “Sure, God we saw the plagues, and yeah we got to take all the silver and gold we could carry, but what have you done for us lately?”

God does not save Israel because of what they believe, or say, or think, or do. God saves them because God is God. “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” Our constant complaining can make it easy for us to miss how God is working within our lives. Whenever things are not going exactly our way it can divert our attention from the plagues and gold that got us this far.

“The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” When we become still and steady ourselves, we will see that God is indeed fighting for us.

A police officer in a small town stopped a motorist who was speeding down Main Street.

“But officer,” the man began, “I can explain.”

“Just be quiet,” snapped the officer. “I’m going to let you cool your heels in jail until the chief gets back.”

“But officer, I just wanted to say...”

“And I said to keep quiet! You’re going to jail!”

A few hours later the officer looked in on his prisoner and said, “Lucky for you that the chief is at his daughter’s wedding. He’ll be in a good mood when he gets back.”

“Don’t count on it,” answered the fellow in the cell. “I’m the groom.”

Sometimes, instead of whining, complaining, or demanding, we need to close our mouths and listen in order to discern how God is working among us.

“Gut Check”

With water in front of them and the Egyptian army behind them, it was gut check time for the Israelites. Did they really believe God was with them and for them? God’s response to Moses is instructive to each one of us. “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to me?’ Tell the Israelites to go forward.”

Otherwise, quit whining, moaning and being afraid and just go forward. I believe this is God’s word to everyone of us. It doesn’t mean the obstacles aren’t real. The water is high. The Egyptian swords are sharp. The economy is bad. My boss is a pain.

But God *is* here. God *is* working among us. God *will* save us. We gather today to hear those words, to believe those words, to obey those words. As God would say to us, “Tell the members of Westminster Presbyterian Church, tell Lud all the rest of the staff, to go forward!”

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