

Westminster Sermon "The Journey Begins"  
Sunday, September 7, 2014  
Scripture: Exodus 14:19-31, Romans 13:8-14  
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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 14:19-31. The Exodus event is the central story of salvation in the Hebrew scriptures and the crossing of the Red Sea is at the heart of this event. The promise Yahweh made to Moses at the burning bush to be Israel's Savior and Redeemer is fulfilled. The God of justice and mercy delivers the people from oppression and their journey of faith begins in this rite of passage between the dividing waters. Hear now God's Holy word.

*19 The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. 20 It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. 21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. 22 The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. 23 The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. 24 At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. 25 He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." 26 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." 27 So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. 28 The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. 29 But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. 30 Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 31 Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Romans 13:8-14. These verses stand at an important juncture in Paul's letter. In chapter 14 he will address specific tensions between the Jews and Gentiles within this Christian community. Today's passage brings the ethical instructions to a close and sets the bar for what is to follow...the importance of loving one another and living with integrity. The love Paul talks about is not some vague "universal love," Paul calls for the difficult task of real love for real people, those with whom we live and work. Paul reminds us, once again, that only a healthy, whole person—one who is capable of loving herself or himself—is capable of loving another. Hear now these words of Holy Scripture.

*8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. 11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "The Journey Begins"

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, as we begin another year on our faith journey, strengthen our lives with healthy tension, holy indifference and the love and integrity of your spirit. As we contemplate scripture together, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen

*"Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea... the waters were divided."*

And the journey began. The journey of faith, that is, as the Israelites walked through their rite of passage. The walls of the water held at bay are a visual reminder of Yahweh's outstretched arms of mercy, offering protection and shelter to a people who had persevered unspeakable hardships and hatred.

The salvation of Israel did not happen by some fluke of nature, my friends...do not be mistaken. Israel was saved by the God who is like none other, the God of steadfast love and mercy, the same God who came to Moses in a burning bush and promised to bring justice and mercy to the oppressed Israelites....the same God who offered Pharaoh numerous opportunities to end the oppression and let God's people go...the same God who provided protection and atonement to all who participated in the Passover Ritual. This is the God who led the people through the divided waters to freedom on the other side.

The rite of passage through the Red Sea has more than one meaning for the Hebrew faith tradition. On the one hand, the sea symbolized the power of chaos in ancient Israel. In their creation story God created the world out of chaos separating the waters above from the waters below. Because the sea had the power to breakdown structure, it was viewed as the ultimate opponent of God. . In the neighboring Canaanite religion, the sea was in fact a god named Yamm who represented chaotic power in the world. The ancient Hebrew had a healthy respect for the sea, which those of us who have spent anytime on water can appreciate.

This past Friday evening, several of us who shared in the Wine, Wings and a Prayer gathering at our home were struck by the beauty and the dread of the torrential rain and storm moving across Lake Springfield as we sat in safety under the deck.

In the Exodus story, the Israelites walk through the middle of the world's chaos to demonstrate God's absolute power over it. God's salvation is reliable even when opposed by evil, chaotic forces. When we think about the destructive role chaos plays in our world today, whether it's within ourselves, our homes, our schools or our community this ancient metaphor resonates with our modern experience, and this journey of faith through the chaos offers us hope and encouragement.

If on the one hand the ancient Israelites understood that too much water would overwhelm them, on the other hand they recognized water as the source of life. One cannot live without water, which makes it a natural metaphor for God's salvation. Isaiah encourages the people to *draw water from the wells of salvation* and the psalmist speaks of *restoring one's soul beside the still waters*. Later, water also played an important role in Israel's cleansing rituals. So when the Israelites began their journey of faith by walking through the parted sea, the water symbolized not only God bringing new life out of chaos, but also the well of salvation, the restoration of Israel's soul and the ritual of cleansing.

As Christians, it is no coincidence that water is an important symbol as our journey begins. The Sacrament of Baptism represents our first step on the journey of faith and the water in this sacrament symbolizes God's sustaining and redeeming presence as we travel through life. In this sacrament, the same God who brought the Israelites through the parted waters welcomes us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

As a community of faith, "the journey begins" each time we celebrate a baptism and each time we begin a new year of learning and growing together. Today's scripture readings remind us of the nature of the One who leads us. The Yahweh of Moses who parts the waters to save the Israelites from their oppression is seen in the Christ of Paul who blinds him on the road to Damascus that he may see himself more clearly as the oppressor. In both rites of passage, God works to stop oppression and to bring freedom. We belong to a God who seeks justice, who shows mercy and who calls us to a life grounded in love and integrity.

Rites of passage, which indicate a transition from one stage to another, begin and continue throughout our journeys. As a community of faith we seek to honor these transitions with ritual or ceremony and we do some more effectively than others. Most cultures consider these rites of passages to be birth, the onset of puberty, graduation, marriage, a life threatening illness or injury, divorce, unemployment, retirement and death. These rites of passages are usually filled with chaos and overflowing with a myriad of emotions, feelings that need to be recognized, honored and understood.

A few years ago I became acquainted with a spiritual discipline in the midst of chaotic waters within my own life which allowed me to *draw from the wells of salvation* and *restore my soul beside the still waters* during a rite of passage. I believe this discipline prepared me to come to Westminster as your pastor.

The spiritual discipline is called *Holy Indifference* and grows out of an entire stream of spiritual literature from Clement of Alexandria in the second century to Meister Eckhart in the thirteenth, to Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth. This ancient Christian virtue of detachment does not resonate within our culture where one is encouraged to hold nothing back. When we express our feelings and opinions without reserve, we can drown in the overflowing waters and become stuck in the sand, unable to move forward or backward. There are consequences to unchartered, unfiltered emotions.

Holy indifference is not the same as apathy or boredom, which is a defense mechanism. The discipline of Holy Indifference is learning to detach oneself from intense emotions, to let go of them long enough to look at them objectively so as to gain some insight and understanding and to *draw water from the well of salvation* on our faith journey.

Holy Indifference recognizes that God's world is larger than our individual perspective and invites us to live into integrity, doing what is right despite our feelings. Holy indifference does not negate our feelings, Holy Indifference hold those chaotic waters back allowing us to walk through them to freedom on the other side.

I would like to close with a quote from James Michener's novel Chesapeake. Michener compares the human spirit with a ship's journey at sea... This summer Peter and I had the privilege of sailing with Bob Wire and Keith Beatty on Bob's sailboat, named

Finesse. It was a blustery Monday afternoon and the wind was strong and changing unpredictably. It was a privilege and joy to watch these two men work together with such skill and finesse maneuvering the boat through the changing waters.

*A ship, like a human being, moves best when it is slightly athwart the wind, when it has to keep its sails tight and attend its course. Ships, like men, do poorly when the wind is directly behind, pushing them sloppily on their way so that no care is required in steering or in the management of sails; the wind seems favorable, for it blows in the direction one is heading, but actually it is destructive because it induces a relaxation in tension and skill. What is needed is a wind slightly opposed to the ship, for then tension can be maintained, and juices can flow and ideas can germinate, for ships, like the human spirit, respond to challenge.*

By the grace of God may we individually and as a faith community respond to challenge and find a healthy tension between overcoming the chaos of the waters we travel and celebrating the life they give. May we learn the art of holy indifference as we travel through the rites of passage and seek to live with love and integrity. Let the journey begin. Amen.