

Sermon "The Rite of Passage"

September 13, 2020

Scripture: Exodus 14:19-31, Matthew 18:21-35

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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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. 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. 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. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. 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. God clogged[a] 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." 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." 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. 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. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 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 God's servant Moses. Amen.

Our second reading, found in the Gospel of Matthew (18:21-35), is a parable Jesus told about this same God of justice and mercy when asked about forgiveness. In this simple story Jesus reveals a mandate for people of faith. Those to whom much has been given, much is expected. This is the Word of God.

21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. Amen.

The title of the meditation: “The Rite of Passage”

The Text: “Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea... the waters were divided.” Exodus 14:21

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, as we begin another year on our faith journey, fill our lives and relationships with your justice, mercy and grace. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen

The Israelites walked through their rite of passage and began the journey of becoming the people of God. 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 endured 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 “I Am the I Am” who came to Moses in a burning bush and promised to bring justice and mercy to the oppressed Israelite, 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. 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. The ancient Hebrew had a healthy respect for the sea, which those of us who have spent any time on water can appreciate.

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. These are words of hope as we confront the destructive role chaos plays in our world today in the midst of a pandemic. The chaos around us we experience within us and we find strength and solace in the order, in the boundaries and in the structure our faith provides. This ancient metaphor resonates with our modern experience, and this orderly journey of faith through the chaotic waters offers us hope, which will not disappoint us.

If the ancient Israelites understood that too much water would overwhelm them, they also recognized water as the source of life. One cannot live without water, which makes it a natural metaphor for God’s salvation, for we cannot live without God. “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so our souls long for you, O God.” 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 rite of passage began 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 in the rite of passage that begins our journeys. The Sacrament of Baptism represents our first step on the journey of faith and the water in this sacrament symbolizes God’s 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 of Christ.

Rites of passage, which indicate a transition from one stage to another, continue throughout our lives. As a community of faith we seek to honor these transitions with ritual or ceremony. Most cultures consider these rites of passages to be birth, the onset of puberty, graduation, beginning a profession, marriage, parenthood, retirement, and death. Sometimes these rites of passage are interrupted by a crisis, a war, an illness, or as we are experiencing in this time and place – a pandemic. In our household, Paul, a recent Tulane graduate, traverses the vicissitudes and complexities of preparation for the Texas Bar, the rite of passage to practice law.

These interruptions color the rite of passage, giving it a definition and meaning of its own and making the way through more difficult and challenging. Often these interruptions make those in transition more determined, more resilient, more appreciative, more mindful of the struggles of others, and more compassionate.

Today's lectionary readings speak to the character of the One who leads us somewhere down the road through the rites of passage on this journey. The God who parts the waters to save the Israelites from their oppression is seen in the face of the king who forgives the slave a vast debt. The good news we share with our children is that we belong to a generous God who seeks justice and who shows mercy. We belong to a God who expects those who follow and who pass this way to also be generous, to also seek justice, and to also show mercy.

As we mark the rite of passage into the 20-21 ministry year at Westminster Presbyterian Church remembering our baptismal vows at the font and receiving nourishment at the communion table, may we journey with Christ into the kingdom of God as the Israelites followed Moses into the Promised land. May our present circumstances give us a new appreciation for our faith and this community so that we never come to be so comfortable and so privileged we inadvertently become the oppressors that work against God's will to honor and respect all people, even if only through acts of omission.

May our rites of passage through the chaotic waters we travel empower us to seek the same justice on behalf of others as we have received from the One who parted the waters. May the life giving, cleansing water of our baptisms give us the generosity and character to show the same mercy to our brothers and sisters as we have been shown by Christ. So be it. Amen.