

March 23, 2014

Once the Israelites have left Egypt, everything that follows in the Torah, the first 5 books of the Old Testament, is set in the context of the journey to the Promised Land. Before the people get to the Promised Land though their journey is interrupted by a long stay at Mount Sinai, where God gives Moses the laws. The story from Exodus 17 occurs just before the people come to Mount Sinai. Between Egypt and Mount Sinai there are stories told that are particularly related to specific places. Within this group of stories we find the story of God providing manna and quails for the Israelites to eat, but we also find the story from Exodus 17, where God provides water for the people, from a rock. God is always providing for the people, who are sometimes rebellious and are very often not thankful for what God has done for them.

Exodus 17: 1-7

¹Directed by GOD, the whole company of Israel moved on by stages from the Wilderness of Sin. They set camp at Rephidim. And there wasn't a drop of water for the people to drink. ²The people took Moses to task: "Give us water to drink." But Moses said, "Why pester me? Why are you testing GOD?"

³But the people were thirsty for water there. They complained to Moses, "Why did you take us from Egypt and drag us out here with our children and animals to die of thirst?"

⁴Moses cried out in prayer to GOD, "What can I do with these people? Any minute now they'll kill me!"

⁵GOD said to Moses, "Go on out ahead of the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel. Take the staff you used to strike the Nile. And go. ⁶I'm going to be present before you there on the rock at Horeb. You are to strike the rock. Water will gush out of it and the people will drink." Moses did what he said, with the elders of Israel right there watching. ⁷He named the place Massah (Testing-Place) and Meribah (Quarreling) because of the quarreling of the Israelites and because of their testing of GOD when they said, "Is GOD here with us, or not?"

In our Romans passage we hear of Paul's concern. Paul reiterates that the life lived in solidarity with Christ will often look like Christ's life - including hardship. The difficulties and defeats will not drive us into shame but be something we can be proud of, because it is about being real, being really in touch with Christ's way. Paul touches this theme while asserting that being set right with God brings us peace with God. This is about reconciliation. Almost by definition, to have our relationship with God right is to have our relationship with ourselves right - and our relationship with others right. When our relationship with God, ourselves and others is not right, we are troubled, stressed, and at worst alienated - from God, ourselves and others.

Romans 5: 1-11

¹By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. ²And that's

not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.

³There’s more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, ⁴and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. ⁵In alert expectancy such as this, we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!

⁶Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn’t, and doesn’t, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn’t been so weak, we wouldn’t have known what to do anyway. ⁷We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. ⁸But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.

⁹Now that we are set right with God by means of this sacrificial death, the consummate blood sacrifice, there is no longer a question of being at odds with God in any way. ¹⁰If, when we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the sacrificial death of his Son, now that we’re at our best, just think of how our lives will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life! ¹¹Now that we have actually received this amazing friendship with God, we are no longer content to simply say it in plodding prose. We sing and shout our praises to God through Jesus, the Messiah!

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – “God’s desire for us”

I would like to begin this morning with a kind of review of where we have been this Lent. The thing about doing a theme series during Lent is that we can really lose someone if they happen to not be here one Sunday and then come the next.....I won’t mention names....but trust me I know who you are.....

I wanted to start off with relating a conversation I had a few weeks back with a friend of mine. There were a number of us out one evening and somehow the conversation turned to the fact that we were just entering Lent, as it was the Saturday, just after Ash Wednesday and just before the first Sunday of Lent. This friend then asked me what I was going to “give up” for Lent. I responded with saying to him, “if you can give me a good theological reason why I should give something up for Lent, then I will consider it.” See, I have always struggled with that idea that we are to give something up, or deny ourselves something during Lent; I never really understood what it meant. Well in response my friend says to me, “I don’t really know why we give something up, but my parents always told me that just as Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross, we need to offer a sacrifice as well during Lent.” The conversation progressed in a

different direction and I never really thought about that conversation again until I was preparing for the service today. I think that this is some of what we are talking about during Lent, to move from a cross of sacrifice to a cross of love.

To start off Lent, Sharon began by introducing us to Derek Flood's book "Healing the Cross," and she talked about the concept of "penal substitution" which is the idea that because of our sinfulness Jesus had to die on the cross. In other words Jesus was sacrificed on the cross for our sins.

Last week then we looked at how this idea of "penal substitution" could be based in biblical legalism, in other words how it is based in the law. Biblical legalism is the theology, or belief that what is important is following the letter of the law, without regard for the spirit of the law. Our redemption is solely dependent on our following the law and not on the love, compassion and grace of God.

We then went on to talk about the idea of promise and the promise that God made to Abraham and all Abraham had to do we to go where God asked. The promise to Abraham was not contingent on Abraham doing A, B, C, and D and doing them perfectly, it was based on God's desire to create something new in Abraham and so Abraham was asked to live into what God was doing and not work it out by himself. So it came down to promise, the promise that God had made to Abraham and how Abraham needed to trust in that promise and be trust-worthy in the promise.

If we move on from there, we need to look at the promise and how do we do this, how do we live into a promise of love and grace.

How many have made a promise in their lives? How many have made a promise to someone that they did not know? In order to be in a promise, I believe that we must know those we are entering into the promise with.

I am going to go back to Dr. David Deane a systematic theology professor at the Atlantic School of Theology and his ideas around knowing, how do we know something? I have a music stand here and so how do I know this stand. Well I can see this stand in being able to see this stand I can know it. I can see that it is this tall and this wide. If I touch it I can know that it will move up and down if I pull on this part here and I will also know that I can pull this entire section off.....like I did before service last week.....and then have trouble getting it back on like I am doing now.

Now we can all come to know things like this stand, as we can all interact with it in virtually the same way. But the question is how do we know God? And this is where it begins to get tricky. We can't see and touch God and yet we come to know God, but how do we do this. We come to know God by entering into relationship with God. We come to know God by engaging in what God is doing. We don't know God by trying to quantifiably learn about God, but rather on a more base level as we open ourselves up to feel God in our lives and to feel God at work on the world. We come to know God by doing God's work in the world today.

To know God we come into relationship with God. And in that relationship we can then live into that promise that God has made. That promise that we heard last week, that God was going to do something new.

Our reading from Exodus this morning is based in a promise. The promise that God made to Moses, that he would bring the slaves out of Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land. The people listened to Moses, they thought that this was great, they would not have to live slaves,

and they would get a great land full of milk and honey, what could be better. The reading this morning occurs just after God has delivered the Israelites from the army of Pharaoh by bringing them across the Red Sea. Once on the other side the Israelites start to rebel, they begin to question what they are doing and they begin to worry the messenger of God, Moses. God comes to bring the people water, but were the people trusting in the promise or were the people about the “me”? They did not show trust in God, they were trying to control everything that happened.

The anthem this morning talks about following in God, trusting in God and our thirst will be quenched by the water from the Rock. Now the anthem is not talking necessarily about a physical thirst being quenched but a spiritual thirst being quenched by the water of Grace. Did those ancient Israelites live into this trust of God? Do I?

Many of us spend our lives living like the Israelites, not trusting in God and I am the first to admit that I usually do my best to try to control everything that happens, only to find out that I really am not that powerful. It seems that when I let go and let God come into things, I can see a new way out, I can see a new way of being.

I am going to switch gears here for a minute and I hope to come back and integrate all of this together.

In order to live into what God is doing we need to be in relationship with God and I talked a bit about that as I talked about knowing God, but one of the ways we live into what God is doing is by coming into relationship with God-self in Jesus. We are moving into incarnational theology and I know Sharon will touch on this later on in Lent, but I wanted to say one thing about incarnational theology, which is the study of God coming to be with us in Jesus. Incarnational theology for me is a way of understanding that God came in Jesus in order that we might come into true relationship with God-self through Jesus. Therefore Jesus was a living breathing part of the promise that God is doing something new and that we are trust in the promise of God. Derek Flood put it this way in his book, “In the incarnation God in Christ entered into our wretched, broken, sinful estate, into the depth of our sickness. Because God would not leave us alone in our darkness, because he would not forsake us in our sin, in Christ God entered into our ‘body of death,’ into a world filled with abuse, oppression and injustice.”

Yet for those of ancient times, they were so caught up in the legalism of penal substitution that many could not see the promise of relationship with God through God-self in Jesus and this ultimately led to the death of Jesus on the cross. We in many ways have held onto this belief and that is why in many ways our theology of the cross is still one based on retribution, based in violence, based on the laws and this affects how we live our lives in the world today. As I said last week our justice system is based in retribution....you do the crime, you do the time.

As I just mentioned the choir will sing this morning the anthem “All the Way My Savior Leads Me” which wonders what more can we ask? The lyrics are very appropriate for this morning as we will hear that as our Savior leads us we will find grace for every trial and though we may falter in those steps the God with whom we are in relationship has promised to be there. We are called but to trust in that promise to not do what the Israelites did upon leaving Egypt and try to control and take over everything. We are called every day to live into what God is doing in the world and to not live into our own sense of “me” in the world today.

Joseph Campbell an American mythologist, writer and lecturer, who is best known for his work in comparative mythology and comparative religion, puts it this way, “We must be willing to let go of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.”

This is echoed in our reading from Romans this morning when Paul talks about us trusting in God and in trusting in God in our lives we become tempered as we deal with the challenges of life. This I believe is a tempering to weather all those things that come our way. We are strengthened in our relationship with God.

We have to remember that when Paul was writing this letter to the Romans, he was writing to a community that he had never visited. He was hoping to go and visit, but had been unable to journey to Rome. So this community was a community that was not begun by Paul and it was a community that found itself at the centre of an empire, surrounded by all of those pagan temples and rituals that could very easily wear away on the community. So Paul is stressing the importance of being in relationship with God and how Jesus was one of the ways in which we come into relationship with God.

And so how does this bring us towards our goal of Easter and an understanding of the cross in love?

I believe that Penal substitution and ultimately the reason for the crucifixion and the death of Jesus is that people were so entrenched in doing what they wanted and not living into what God was trying to do in the world. The people did not live into the promise of God in Jesus. To view the cross as a place of love we need to see the promise that God was giving, to be able to live into the promise, by being in true relationship with God through Jesus.

We are called to change from life retribution a life where punishment is what matters, a life based in doing things in our way. To a life of true relationship with God in Jesus, a life that is based in the mercy, compassion and love that is the bases for God's promise to us as a people of God in relationship with God.

Once again I am going to leave you with a quote this morning. Today it is by Anthony Douglas Williams, who is the author of the Book “Inside the Divine Pattern,” which is a journey to uncover the mysteries of this key time on our history using ancient spiritual wisdom and scientific discoveries. Williams says, “Our souls speak through our actions not our words.”

So let our actions speak of a soul that is in relationship with God, a soul which trusts in the promise that God is doing a new thing and a soul that lives in love and not in retribution and allowing our soul to reside there, we come to see the cross in love. **AMEN**