

“We Make the Way”
August 16, 2020

Exodus 14:10-18
Isaiah 40:3-5

Where have we been?

Five months ago this weekend, we cancelled the March 15 worship service as the pandemic moved into Iowa and Johnson County. We were able to start recording and posting our online worship services a week later. As we moved through Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, and this summer, we gathered to worship in our separate homes. We responded in significant ways to the suffering caused by the pandemic and the economic upheaval that came with it. We continued our ongoing efforts toward justice as our country and our community began a time of racial reckoning. Added to all of this, last week’s destructive storm.

Through all of this, we have worked hard to keep connected with each other. We have strived to maintain the bonds of love that make us a congregation.

And here’s something I miss:

In regular times, on normal Sundays, that is to say, in days *not like these*, when good sense and common concern keeps us separated, when the pressure of an uncertain public school and university year increases, when our racial reckoning continues and the economic turmoil is unabated—in regular times after we worship, many of us gather in Rockwood Hall to drink a little coffee and talk about this and that, Sometimes the conversations are light as we joke and talk about sports or weather or gardens. Sometimes we seriously discuss our lives and our commitments and give expression to our deep hopes and our great fears.

All of this is part of what it means to be a congregation.

After five months, I miss those times and those normal Sundays.

Along with others, I attend the Facebook and Zoom Coffee Hours. These times together still lead to the laughter and support that we have known. Our Lamentations Bible study grew out of an exchange during the Facebook Coffee Hour.

We can give thanks that we have come this far. We might even say with the old hymn: “Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by God’s help we’ve come.”

That’s where we’ve been.

Where are we going?

Last Sunday, as a few of us were posting on that virtual coffee hour page, I started to recognize a pattern in my preaching in recent weeks. I’ve been preaching a lot about paths and roads, about “following in the ways of Jesus Christ,” about *finding* our way in these strange and challenging times.

I want to continue, well, *down that path*, this morning. Because my interest remains with where we're going and how we will get there.

So let's start with that great story from the Book of Exodus.

The Hebrew people are up against the waters of the Red Sea shoreline as the chariots of Pharaoh close in on them.

It's a familiar story to many—from Sunday School and sermons, from Hollywood we have learned of Moses bringing the Hebrew people out of bondage. Pharaoh, of course, was not pleased and once he recovered from those plagues, he set out to bring his escaped captives back.

We know how the story ends: Moses stretches out his hand over the sea, the waters are divided, and the Israelites walk through the sea on dry ground. Then, as Miriam, the sister of Moses, sang in the earliest song recorded in scripture: "God triumphed gloriously; horse and rider God has thrown into the sea."

It is a story of God's power and God's might.

It is a story, as Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the civil rights movement would say, it is a story of God who can make a way out of no way.

That has been the burden of my preaching in reaching weeks. What is the "way" that God is making? How can we find it, know it, and follow on it?

But in the past week I noticed something in this story that I hadn't seen before—which, of course, is why we continue to read scripture, even when we "know" it, because as our Congregation Pilgrim forebears tell us, "God has yet more truth and light to break forth from God's Word."

The Hebrew people stand on the shoreline and Pharaoh draws near. They are clear-sighted enough to see what's coming and bitterly ask Moses: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?"

Then, as Moses seeks to reassure the people, the LORD God says to Moses: "Why do you cry out to me?"

I heard those words and more truth and light broke forth.

"Why do you cry out to me?"

Maybe because the situation is so desperate. Maybe because, death and fear and the unknown press in on the Hebrew people in the way that death and fear and the unknown are pressing in on us in these days.

"Why do you cry out to me?"

God's question is so disturbing that even biblical scholars and commentators are puzzled. One calls it "odd." It must be, they suggest, that those words originally belonged someplace else in the story. Perhaps they have been misplaced.

But it made me wonder. What if those are just the words that Moses and a desperate people needed to hear?

What if those are just the words that we need to hear?

These words contain the encouraging suggestion that Moses has power, that the people have power—the ability to act. And that from that power, from that ability, they will be able to make a way through; that perhaps the poet was right in say that the best way out is always through.

Why do you cry out to me? Summon your resources, your courage, your faith, your strength, your hope, your love and make a way.

Do not wait for God or cry out to God.

Instead hear what God says to Moses and the people: “Journey!” “Go forward.” “Move on.”

Make a way. Make a way out of no way.

So at a later time, God cries to the people through the prophet Isaiah:

Make straight in the desert a highway...
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

We usually reserve those words to be read or sung during Advent. But again, the truth and light of scripture will not be bound by our little calendars.

God cries out: Get going. Get to work. Make a highway. Make a way.

These are not the words that we would expect. Or at least they are not the words I expect.

I expect God to say: “Walk on this road that I have made. Go along this path that I will show you.”

In such cases that task for us seems to be to find and follow. Difficult as that might be, the way is already there.

But as we listen carefully to the God who speaks to Moses, the God who speaks through the prophets in our current days of uncertainty, we might hear a new reality: the road is not there.

But take heart!

Along with that disturbing, challenging reality, we hear a new calling: Create a new way where there is no way.

Maybe I'm hearing this out of my family history. Last Sunday, I told the Facebook Virtual Coffee Hour participants about my father, who, in the early days of WWII, was part of the battalion that built the ALCAN Highway, the supply road that would connect the United States to Alaska through Canada. They charted their own course. They built a road where there was no road.

Why do we cry out to God?

Let us instead listen as God cries out to us: "Prepare the way. Make straight a highway."

What crooked paths of corruption and greed need to be straightened so that all people might have access to the still abundant resources of our nation and our world?

What deep valleys and pits of racism and injustice need to be filled and lifted up so that the very image of God in each person is given the full respect and freedom it deserves?

What mountains of ineffective and incompetent leadership need to be brought low so that our government might be at the service of those who are governed—promoting the public health, alleviating some of the great economic pain that leaving so many people hungry and homeless and the rest of us worried about the future in ways we never imagined we would be?

What uneven ground do we need to level, what rough places do we need to make a plain so that social and economic mobility become possible, with all the creativity and energy they bring with them?

Do not cry to God.

Prepare the way.

By the work that *we do*, the work that we have been *equipped* to do, God will indeed make a way out of no way.

By the actions *we take*, even if our actions are uncertain and hesitant in these uncertain days, we will blaze a new path.

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed.