

“Cloud by Day; Fire By Night”

Exodus 13: 17-22; 40: 33-38

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” ¹⁸ So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. ^[b] The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. ¹⁹ And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.” ²⁰ They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹ The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. ²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

The Word of God for the People of God....Thanks be to God

This Sunday, we are beginning a new sermon series entitled, "The Elements of Faith" and we start out with a fascinating story from the Book of Exodus. This is the start of a new beginning for the Israelites. The first Passover has already occurred. The Pharaoh has released the people. They are setting out on this journey which will eventually transform them from people who live in oppression to becoming the people, the community which God created them and calls them to be.

In this part of the Exodus story, we get a theological grounding for the people's journey ahead. This part of the narrative ties together what the people had experienced in the past to the promise of wholeness becoming a reality for all of God's people here and now. It invites all of God's people to step out of the darkness and embrace the light and love of God. This theological grounding for the journey ahead reframes the people's narrative...no longer one of brokenness and hurt which defines the people's history. Now the people's narrative is rooted in the vision of God's shalom fully realized here on Earth, a vision where God's glory shines all around, a vision where the work of healing and wholeness is complete, And it all starts with this particular moment in the people's story....a moment in time which recognizes that departing from what we used to know will be difficult, a moment in time which recognizes that there will be temptations to go back to the way things used to be. It all starts with this particular moment in the people's story, a moment which begins the long struggle for freedom and well-being, not just for a few but for all of God's people. This is a moment of new beginnings for the people of God.

As readers, we are told that this journey of new beginnings happens because the Pharaoh let the people go. We are also told that God did not lead them by the way of the Philistines even though it was the shorter route. Instead God thought if the people have to fight and face war, they would go back to Egypt, that they

would abandon this vision of healing and wholeness and instead choose oppression and suffering. At the very beginning of this journey, this journey which would transform the people from ones who live surrounded by broken, unfair systems, to ones who become the community of love which God created them to be, at the very beginning of this journey, God knew that if the people faced danger in any way, shape or form, that they would choose to go back to the way things used to be because it was easy, because it was comfortable, because it was what they knew even though that way will never bring about God's Kingdom being fully realized here on Earth for all of God's people.

So what does God do... God takes them by the roundabout way of the wilderness, a place where the people are confronted with their idolatry, a place where the people are stripped of their arrogance and sense of self-reliance. God takes them by the roundabout way of the wilderness, where the people are humbled by the Spirit of God, where they are invited to be in relationship with each other and with their God who loves them more than they could ever know. God takes them by the roundabout way of the wilderness where they are called to be participants in this vision of healing and wholeness given for all of God's people.

And all along as the people are going this roundabout way of the wilderness, God is there, leading them through a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God is there, surrounding them behind and before with a visible sign of God's presence

in and among the people. All along this journey which transforms the people from ones who experience oppression and suffering to ones who are filled with healing and wholeness, God is there, moving in among the people, bringing about the work that only God can do.

Or let me say it this way... Like many of you, I have been watching the protests in various communities unfold this week. Words continue to fail me as I have listened to the hurt and anger. I have often wondered if I should have chosen a different text for this Sunday but the Spirit of Lord kept bringing me back to these words from Exodus, bringing me back to this start of a journey which would eventually transform the people from ones who live surrounded by oppression and suffering to ones who embrace the vision of God's Shalom fully realized here on Earth.

Again, this Sunday, I stand before with more questions than answers but as I read these words from Exodus, as I am reminded that this world does not have the last word, as I am reminded that on each stage of the journey, although it may be a roundabout way, the Lord goes in front of us, I know that as the people of faith, we have nothing to fear. We have nothing to fear as we confront all the things which are broken in our world. We have nothing to fear as we are stripped of our arrogance and sense of self-reliance, leaving us humbled in the sight of the Lord.

This journey for healing and wholeness has begun and in this uncertain time, we are being invited to explore, probably more fully than ever before, what it means to be in relationship with one another, what it means when we proclaim that all are created in the image of God. We are being invited to embrace our call as care-takers, as participants in bringing about this vision of God's Shalom for all people, not just the ones who look like us or think like us.

As I said before, I do not have all the answers so I will simply leave us all with this...this second part of our text:

When Moses had finished all the work, ³⁴ the cloud covered the meeting tent and the LORD's glorious presence filled the dwelling. ³⁵ Moses couldn't enter the meeting tent because the cloud had settled on it, and the LORD's glorious presence filled the dwelling. ³⁶ Whenever the cloud rose from the dwelling, the Israelites would set out on their journeys. ³⁷ But if the cloud didn't rise, then they didn't set out until the day it rose. ³⁸ The LORD's cloud stayed over the dwelling during the day, with lightning in it at night, clearly visible to the whole household of Israel at every stage of their journey.

These are the few last verses from the Book of Exodus. It is the moment when healing and wholeness comes to life in front of the eyes of all the people. God's glory is shining all around and the struggle for wellbeing is no more.

This is the vision which sustains us. This is the hope which guides our path. This is the point along the journey when “The work on the Tabernacle is finished. And everything that could be done by human agents is complete.

As people of faith, we know we are not there yet. There is still work to be done before we see this vision of healing and wholeness fully realized here on Earth as it is in Heaven. So in the meantime, we journey, becoming the people God created and called us to be. And along the journey, even though we maybe going by the roundabout way of the wilderness, we remain open to the presence of God moving in and among us. We reclaim what it means to believe that all are created in the image of God. We reimagine how our words and our actions, yes even during this time of quarantine, we reimagine how our words and our actions can build up the Tabernacle, the Body of Christ, here on Earth as it is in Heaven.

On this journey of transformation, we will not lose hope. We will not turn back. We will not change our minds and abandon this vision of God’s Shalom promised to all of God's people.

As people of faith, we will keep working on the Tabernacle. We will keep moving forward on this journey which will transform us from people who live surrounded by broken unfair systems, to people who have become the community of love, the community of grace, the community of justice which God has created

and calls us to be, knowing all along that the Lord goes in front of us as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Amen.