



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
Watertown, WI

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost August 18, 2013

“The Sacred Journey”

(Exodus 14:13)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today” (Exodus 14:13).

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life. We humbly pray that we may live before You in righteousness and purity forever; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

If there is a single most important story in the Old Testament, this is probably it. Scholars tell us the Exodus, the history of the people of God being led from slavery in Egypt, through the waters and into the wilderness for forty years and then finally crossing into the Promised Land, scholars tell us this history contains within it all the major themes and motifs of the rest of the Bible. It is the “primal saving event” of the Old Testament. It sets forth the idea that God calls people from slavery to freedom, that God provides, that God will never abandon, that though he disciplines, he also saves, and that, therefore, there is ultimately nothing to fear.

This account of the exodus is the autobiography of God’s people. And in a poignant and intentional way, this history points to the Messiah. That is, this story comes to full fruition in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He too sets us free from our slavery by the blood of the Lamb and by passing through water. He too will never abandon us, and therefore he repeatedly admonishes “fear not. Be not afraid.”

Ultimately then, in an amazing way, this history of the exodus of God’s people out of Egypt, their sin and rebellion and God’s forgiveness and faithfulness, this history is your autobiography as well. Something that happened with God’s ancient people is happening in your life. Something very old is also very current and contemporary. The same mercy which saved then, saves now, and it comes

from the same source, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who brought his people out of Egypt with a mighty hand, the God who stretched out his hands on the cross, the God who made us his people through water. Their story is your story.

But let's back up and take a little closer look at this primal saving event. The twelve tribes of Israel are in Egypt because of a famine. At first they were refugees, guests, foreigners who were willing to work for cheap. But over the decades, the Egyptians turned them into forced laborers for Pharaoh's ambitious construction projects. They were slaves. They groaned under their oppression. They cried out to God. God heard their cries and sent Moses to set them free. After some tough negotiating and ten horrible plagues, Pharaoh finally concedes, deciding the Jewish slaves are no longer worth the trouble. He tells them to leave. And so they do; they gather their children and grandparents, their livestock, their belongings, and they walk out of Egypt into freedom, sweet freedom.

At the same time they're stepping out into the wilderness, the desert, and if a desert is anything, it's a place of scarcity and danger and inhospitality. The desert has a way of spitting out those who enter into it.

Early in the journey, they arrive at the swampy wetlands known sometimes as the Sea of Reeds, sometimes as the Red Sea. They set up camp, and an unthinkable disaster looms. Back on the horizon they see the dust of an approaching army, chariots, horses, infantry . . . the whole shebang. Pharaoh has changed his mind. And the people lose their nerve: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have brought us out here to die in the wilderness?" The joy of their new freedom has vanished. Their gratitude has disappeared. Trust has faded. Their courage and commitment to the future as God's free people, that too has taken flight. "It would have been better for us" they say, "to serve the Egyptians than to die out here."

That is autobiography. That is your story and

mine. We are like these people. At the critical moment we lose our nerve. Concerns over safety and security trump gratitude and courage and trust.

A new venture, a new career in a new city, a decision to get married, the gift of a child . . . it *all* comes with risk, danger, uncertainty, and there isn't a one of us, in these situations, who doesn't say or think, "Why am I doing this? The past wasn't so bad. In fact, it was downright comfortable compared to what I'm getting myself into." "It would be better to be a slave in Egypt than to die in the wilderness."

In Joseph Ellis's biography of George Washington, a consistent theme is how Washington was a quintessential eighteenth-century English gentleman who loved, and never wanted anything more in life, than the security and pleasant comforts of his life at Mt. Vernon. But time and time again, Washington said good-bye to his wife, and his comfortable orderly life, to lead what looked like an impossibly dangerous venture for freedom, to risk everything – property, reputation, life itself for freedom.

I never preside at a wedding without thinking about the courage it requires to make that commitment to hold each other "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death." They have no idea how this thing is going to turn out. As a matter of fact, when we make that commitment we don't really know who the other will be in the future. It is a great, biblical moment when a couple steps out into the wilderness.

I never preside at the Sacrament of Holy Baptism without thinking about the depth of patience and love that parenting requires, but even more so the depth of God's patience and love as he adopts yet another child to be his own. He washes them and makes his dwelling place in them and sets out with them into the future.

Often we long to preserve the status quo, but God is constantly calling his people, you and me, into a

new future. God agitates our lives and makes the status quo uncomfortable, if not unbearable. He calls us on a journey and promises to go with us.

That's how it goes for God's people in the old story, with the Egyptians charging in from behind and the Red Sea immovable in front. There's really no hope of escape. Until God leads them into – of all places – the water. Passing through the water they are saved. They walk into the Red Sea as refugees, scared to death, wishing for all the world they were still sitting around the fireplace in the old slave dorms. They walk into the water as frightened refugees and they emerge on the other side a nation, a people with a new identity and a new purpose. They are his people now! They belong to him.

To be sure, they will regress again and again; they will whine in the wilderness. They will sell themselves out to idols. They will be unfaithful. They will test the boundaries of God's patience. They will stir up his wrath. The Lord will punish them, sometimes severely. But the Lord will never let go of them. Day after day, year and year, decade after decade, they will continue the journey together because of his faithfulness, his commitment to them, his promises, his covenant. The people liked to talk about their commitments to God, their promises, their faith . . . but in the end, all that wasn't really worth much. When it comes to salvation history, it's his commitment, his covenant, his faithfulness and mercy, his determination that saves. That too is autobiography, your story and mine.

One day God's ancient people would look back at it all and they would see the hand of God, but not at the moment. At the moment they are too busy worrying about the immediate dangers and uncertainties. Perhaps you too can see yourself in these people.

Today, regardless of who we are, old or young – God calls us to live into the future with courage and hope and obedience, with gratitude and joy. He calls us

to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God”. He calls us to a stronger sense of responsibility for our creation, our community, and for our neighbors. . . a stronger passion for his kingdom on earth. God calls us, as individuals and as a church, to go on a new, old journey, and he promises to go with us. Along the way he always has to say “Fear not.”

From beginning to end, “Fear not.” From Sarah’s miraculous pregnancy, to Moses’ burning bush: “Fear not.” From the people peering into the wilderness to the harrowing journey through the sea: “Fear not.” From shepherds on the hillside outside of Bethlehem, to women near an empty tomb outside Jerusalem: “Fear not.” “Do not be afraid.”

God is always saying that, and always needs to say it. It is what the newly married need to hear, but it’s also what those couples who are celebrating their 50th, 60th anniversary need to hear. “Fear not. I am with you.” It’s what parents who are bringing the newborn home need to hear . . . but it’s also what parents need to hear who are dropping that new born off at the university. “Be not afraid. That one is my baptized child.” It’s what those who are critically ill need to hear, and widow and widowers: “Fear not; I hold you in the palm of my hand.” It’s what those who are in trouble need to hear. “Be not afraid; I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” It’s what sinners who are also saints need to hear. “Fear not, for though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be white as snow.” It’s what those who are stepping out into any kind of wilderness need to hear: “Fear not. For I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

He has brought you out of the land of slavery to sin death and the devil. He has taken you through the waters. You came out on the other side as his child, one of his people, no longer strangers and refugees. He is journeying with us through this wilderness we call life. He is providing for us. And by his mercy, by his

steadfast love, one day he will bring us into the
Promised Land. That is their story and yours. That is
the autobiography of God's people. So,
 Do not be afraid.
 Stand firm
 And see the salvation the Lord will work for you.
Amen.

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