

Proper 19 A
Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21
September 12, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

This week Rip and I attended an Austin District pastors' meeting to bid farewell to our District Superintendent of the last two years, Kim Cape. Kim is taking a job with the Annual Conference in congregational development, starting new churches and revitalizing existing ones, and we will be receiving a new superintendent—in Methodist lingo we call that person the DS, which for us preachers is another word for boss.

So Kim preached for us, and she preached on this text from Exodus. What a fundamental story this is for the people of God. It is an example of a story that wears well over time, mainly because we can see ourselves in it. It's also very graphic, which is why it's lent itself to being told in movie form (The Ten Commandments). I want to point out a particularly graphic bit, the description of the Egyptian army, drowned and dead on the beach. This part of this story is troublesome to many of us. The Bible has a whole lot of these stories, where God whoops up on somebody and kills the whole lot of them. And all I can say about that is that these are very old texts. They come to us as the story of people's experience of God, passed down through generations, shouted to us across millennia, with an enormous gulf of culture and history lying in between.

For me, the main point of the defeat of the Egyptians is not that God kills some people in order to save other people. When people of faith start thinking like that, it takes us into dangerous territory. For me the point is that God hears the cry of God's people and acts in unimaginable, miraculous ways, doing what looks impossible in order to save the people. And that's the message our DS preached on this week. She talked

about her focus during her time here, which was to buck the trend of decline so common today in mainline churches. You may remember hearing the statistics, that with each successive generation in our country, a lower and lower percentage of people is connected with the Christian faith. They're projecting that 10% of the children of today will grow up with exposure to the Bible and basic Christian teaching. It seems like an inevitable slide, so folks like our DS have worked hard to see what we as a church can do to counter it. Kim taught us that there is a natural cycle in any church: it's born and grows; it moves onto a plateau, then into *unrecognized decline*, then recognized decline, and finally death. This is how many churches go unless something special happens to interrupt that process and start a new growth cycle.

One such special thing that has happened for us is what we've called the Transformation process. We've looked at our life together with more objective eyes than usual, checking certain pulse points and signs of health that we might miss just doing what we regularly do. Because a church can feel really vital and still be either in a plateau or the unrecognized slide into decline. And that church will have to decide to take intentional steps to start a new cycle of growth.

The thing is, you start talking about transforming and changing things in the church—our priorities, what we do and how we make decisions—and most of us get nervous. You know, it's almost a cliché—change is hard. Even good change. Look at the Israelites in the story—they've been slaves in Egypt, treated brutally by the state, only given what was necessary to keep them alive and laboring. And here they are, just starting their journey toward liberation, not even to the Red Sea yet, and they're already complaining about wanting to go back where they came from. "Were there not

enough graves in Egypt, that you had to drag us out here to die in the middle of nowhere? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?" God had made a covenant with them, to make them a great nation, a blessing to the world, and there was no way that was going to happen with them as slaves. They had to become free to claim God's promise and identity for them. Yet here, just a few steps toward their new future of freedom, the only direction they can look is backwards.

Maybe you can imagine how they felt; I sure can. In the face of the unknown, our tendency as humans seems to be to look back toward the familiar, no matter how damaging it might have been to us. You've heard me use this quote before—"I don't really like living in hell, but at least I know the names of all the streets." We like what we already know, even if it's killing us. Our resistance to change is actually very natural; we learn as kids in school about our bodies' stress response, what we call our fight-or-flight mechanisms. This is the way the animal part of our brain helps us survive in the world. It takes a kind of hyper-vigilance to adapt to a new situation, and our animal brains tell us the whole time that we're in danger. It makes our stomachs hurt and disorients us and reminds us that there's a whole lot we're not in control of. And we don't particularly enjoy that state of agitation.

Yet over and over again in the scriptures, God asks people to gird up the stomachache and step into the unknown, to sign on for change without knowing the particulars. To Noah, God said, there's going to be a big flood, and I want you to build this ridiculously large boat, even though everyone's going to think you're crazy. To Abraham and Sarah, God said, get up and go to *the land that I will show you*. I'll let you know when we get there. To Moses, God said, tell these people I said they're

supposed to follow you, and I'll get you all out of here once and for all. To Jesus disciples, God said, go into the world and take nothing with you; just tell folks I love them. The sovereign, all-powerful, miracle-working God never tells people how it's going to turn out! God just tells us where to step next. And God asks us to trust.

The folks in the story see the Egyptians pressing down on them from behind, they start pitching a fit. Their danger response kicks in—what were we thinking following you? And Moses says what for me is one of the most powerful lines in the Bible: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

Do not be afraid, stand firm; you have only to keep still. For it is God who will deliver the people. It is God who will usher in the new future. It is God who will provide what the people need along the way. It is God who will transform reality. God does not ask the people, does not ask us to do any of that. God only asks us to trust that what lies ahead of us just might be better than what lies behind us.

Clearly this is a message for us as a body, as a congregation. For as a church in 21st century North America, we are immersed in change. We adults and kids are bombarded from every side with diversions and indulgences; the whole science and means of communication are exploding with growth; more and more new people move into this community, bringing their needs for roads, schools, water and a purpose for their lives; and many of those same people are becoming less and less interested in trying to crack church code. In response, a lot of churches look back, back to the glory days, when everybody went to church, and there was respect, and you knew what to

expect. That point of tension, between what lies behind us and what surrounds us can feel uncomfortable, and that very place is where I believe God asks us to trust in the possibility of a new thing.

It's true for us as a church, but I think it's true for us individually as well. For if God means to transform the church, it will only be through the lives of transformed church people. So try to imagine yourself standing there on the shore of the Red Sea. What kind of bondage might God be calling you to leave behind? Is there something that sucks the life out of you but is so familiar, you just can't bear to let it go? Is there a place in your heart where you secretly yearn for Moses to show up and say, "Come on, pack it up, we're getting out of here?" When that has happened to you, when you know God has done something for you that you couldn't do yourself, that becomes the foundation for the work of the church in the world. I really do believe that the big transformation God seeks to bring about, the work of shifting whole systems and confronting principalities and powers, has to begin on a foundation of personal transformation. God's work of transforming and liberating the world is rooted in the hearts and lives of people who know God has transformed and liberated them.

I have to tell you that I see this already in the life of this congregation. There are so many people doing active ministry in this church, not because we've always done it that way, not because we need a slot filled, but because they feel a pull on their insides, because they feel like it's something real in an often superficial world. A few of you make contact with folks who have worshiped with us for the first time. We need more people to do that, but you few are concrete signs of God's hospitality in this place. Some of you offer your time to teach our children, Sunday mornings and Sunday nights.

Teachers have to trust that God will supply what they don't know, and very often they find love abounding in return. Some of you answer the phone for the Barnabas Connection. You enter into the stories of people in trouble—these days not just folks on welfare or living in their cars, but working families who all of a sudden can't make the mortgage. You phone volunteers provide a listening ear and help where you can and again are the face of Christ for a suffering world.

As we move ahead and keep working this transformation process, I want to keep our energy focused on areas where folks feel moved to serve. Because that movement in us and our response to it are the end goal of our transformation. We're not just called to produce or modernize or be more successful. In my opinion, God's purpose for us is to learn to train our eyes upon the pillar of cloud and fire that God has raised up in our midst. It is to learn more and more every day to trust the goodness and power of God, even when we're not exactly clear where it's taking us.

Allowing God to transform and liberate us is not, and cannot be, business as usual. We will not just fall out of bed one day and find ourselves and the world around us turned into a new creation. It's a choice we have to make, a choice to override our stress response, to look ahead and believe that God goes before us. And it's a choice to believe, to trust, to know and stake our lives on the promise that the hand of God is indeed mighty to save. Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.