

Sermon: "Traveling Mercies"

Exodus 32:1-14

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Union Congregational UCC Church

Green Bay, WI

Trouble in the Text

We've had two doozies for readings this morning. We're seeing a side of God that doesn't show up very often. I don't recall any hymns or Christmas carols about the golden calf. The wedding party story with a misguided guest made me cringe when I first heard it. What happened to "What a friend we have in Jesus?" I thought our faith was all about love, blessings and doing good works.

It is. And it's also about reality. The reality of maintaining a covenant. I will spend more time on the golden calf story, but I also want to consider that poor wedding guest, gnashing his teeth in the darkness. Let's go to Exodus first.

It's been a tough time for the Israelites, who were slaves in Egypt for centuries. They were making bricks, constantly praying to the Lord for relief. Then it happened. Liberation! Moses led them away from their captors. Many expected never to be burdened again. Perhaps an ancient version of "early retirement."

It was not to be so. The journey to freedom lasted a long time, the proverbial 40 years. After a while many wished they had never left slavery...the old and familiar was certainly brutal, but it was better than their suffering in the desert. Barely any water or food, endless plodding against fierce wind and piercing sand. No shade for 40 years? We cannot imagine their suffering.

Or can we? We may have had life-threatening challenges. Or we've taken on long-term commitments with the end nowhere in sight. For some, it's lengthy student loans. Sometimes, it's adopting a child. How about the biggest of all? Marriage.

I remember our first mortgage. Far from life threatening, I lost many nights of sleep, wondering whether we'd end up in the poor house. I feared that someday we'd miss a payment and we would lose everything – house, money invested, our personal security and most terrifying -- our future. Especially, when we'd look at the monthly bank statement. Out of the thousands of dollars paid in, we only owned \$50 of our first house. Twenty-nine more years to go.

Let's get back to the desert. God and the people finally made it to Mount Sinai. Everyone was exhausted. God called Moses to the top of the mountain – an outdoor leadership conference which lasted a long 40 days. Already in despair, the people at the foot of the mountain, looked to Aaron, Moses' brother, to fashion a new god. God and Moses were nowhere to be found. The people simply gave up on them.

Aaron, possibly afraid of a revolt, quickly responded to threats for a new god to lead them. He called for the gold earrings to be melted down into a comforting icon. To hear him tell it later, a little gold calf –

travel size, if you will – simply jumped out of the cauldron. While that sounds silly to us, many cultures of that era worshipped bulls for their strength and power.

God got wind of the calf and called Moses to task! “Your people are making an icon, a graven image. That was the first commandment I gave them. They repeatedly pledged their support of our covenant. The minute you’re gone, your people turned on me.”

Surprisingly, God is disowning the very people he brought out of Egypt. In fact, God sinks further into despair. The Great Flood comes to mind; maybe it’s time to start all over again. Maybe God can birth a new nation with Moses at the head. Moses picks up on that cue.

Grace in the Text

We’ve seen the trouble that befell the Israelites. Now let’s talk about God’s grace in response. Only this time, God’s grace comes from the human Moses.

Moses talks God down from despair. Moses steers away from the idea of a flood, using three arguments. First, Moses reasserts that the people belong to God, not him. Neither of them is particularly proud of the rebellion below; they’re both willing to foist them on the other.

But then Moses appeals to God’s reputation. God made a spectacle at the Red Sea to show the world he was God of all people – stronger than Pharaoh. Moses pleaded that killing the Israelites now would only strengthen Egypt’s hand. It would backfire on God.

Then Moses points out that the promise of a nation was made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants – not to Moses. How would anyone trust God’s promises if he were to renege on this one? God cannot push “reset” and start a new nation. The original promise must stand.

Eventually, commandments in hand, they move on. They will march toward the promised land; they will maintain their covenant with God. The nation will survive. Perhaps many individuals will die before they make it to their destination – Moses among them. But the nation survives to grow God’s kingdom.

And the covenant lives on. No one said living in covenant would be easy. Even for God. Despair strikes us at our lowest points. Grace can come from many unlikely sources. A human giving God advice. An itinerant preacher challenging the Roman empire, but also stopping to give a lonely woman “living water” at a well.

Even stories about the poorly dressed wedding guest may give us hope. If we put the story in perspective, we understand that Jesus tells this story just before Holy Week. He surmises his impending execution. He tells two other parables beforehand:

1. The woman asking Jesus for prominent positions in Heaven for her two sons and,
2. The wicked tenants.

The wicked tenants story parodies the actions of Jewish hierarchy who have aligned themselves with Rome. The tenant story has nothing to do with everyday Jewish believers. Jesus is pointing out the hypocrisy of leadership aligning with Rome against the believers they should be serving.

The wedding guest story comes directly after as a capstone to the previous two parables. The king orders a banquet for his son. The A-list invitations are sent out, only to be rejected. In fact, some of the

guests kill the messengers too. We infer the wedding guests represent Jewish authorities who rejected Jesus' message. The king then sends the invitations to any and all who would come – the good and the bad. They come indeed, including a man without a wedding robe. We are shocked when the king complains about his clothing and summarily dismisses him to eternal punishment.

Isn't that a bit harsh??? What happened to a kingdom of love and no more tears??

Perhaps we can continue with the parable. If God is the King, and Jesus the son, then perhaps the story does not culminate with a fatal fashion flaw. But it may be that the guest does not want to fully participate in the kingdom. In parable terms, he is not dressed for the celebration. In our words, the guest may not truly desire being a part of the kingdom. In some interpretations, the guest did not assume the clothing of Christ...did not take seriously the meaning of covenanting with God's Kingdom.

While harsh, it does point out the burdens of a joyous covenant. We must be willing to accept the costs of covenant as well as its joys.

Trouble in Our World

As ever, that was then, this is now. How could these ancient stories possibly apply to us?

The stories we read today speak about the difficulties of upholding our covenant with God. We seem to not be able to love each other as God loves us. Indeed, it is the human condition. But we desire holiness. We strive to do the will of God in our lives and in all human (and animal) relations. My words.

We've all known despair; we, have thrown our hands in the air, giving up on challenges before us. We may seek unholy resolutions to very difficult world problems. We see wars every day on TV. None of us have escaped the daily scenes of bloodshed, continual bombing, and people suffering on both sides of the Israeli-Hamas conflict.

We understand oppression even if we do not directly bear its burden. As only one example, women suffer abuses here and throughout the world – healthcare, education, denial of basic human dignity in some countries. The United Nations has condemned Afghanistan for its gender genocide by denying women of any public existence whatsoever.

This week, CNN reported on underground schools for girls in Afghanistan. The Taliban has passed laws making it illegal for girls to attend any school past the sixth grade. College is out of the question. In defiance of the law, some women set up underground schools for girls. They are teaching chemistry, physics, and math to 30 girls in an underground room, hoping they remain hidden during their classes. Not only do the classes provide a modicum of education for the students, it saves them from the depression of home confinement.

The sequestered classes reach about 400 girls throughout the country. The girls and teachers risk prison sentences for learning, possibly execution. Does it make a dent in a population of millions of girls and women?

Yes, a holy dent.

Just as God began a nation with an elderly couple well past childbearing age, these courageous girls keep a light burning for others. One girl noted that she wants to be able to show her face and take her place in the world when the Taliban is gone. Hope for the kingdom.

In our own state, we witness the beginning of book banning. The American Library Association reports that as of August 31, 2023, preliminary data finds nearly 4,000 books are being challenged throughout the country. There are 49 titles being challenged in Wisconsin alone.

Although a far more serious problem in other states, Wisconsin has begun to fight back. Pearl Street Books, a bookstore in La Crosse, hosted two events this month in conjunction with Banned Books Week. One was an adult book fair; the other, an open mic event in the store itself, for patrons to read passages from their favorite banned or challenged books. One girl remarked that anytime she sees another book pulled from the shelves, she adds it to her summer reading list.

Grace in Our World

We are the everyday men, women and children of the Kingdom. We may never go to the mountaintop. We must attend to life as we know it. We go to school, we work, we play golf, mow the lawn and take out the garbage.

Yet we are holy beings too. We pray to maintain our place in the kingdom. It is God who wants to hear our prayers: prayers for ourselves, prayers for others, prayers simply to connect to God, prayers of joy, hatred, depression and confusion. Prayers of doubt, triumph, petty complaints and fun are all welcomed from the one who loved us first. It really doesn't matter what we pray; we are in relationship with God.

God's answers may astound us; they may underwhelm our most desperate requests. We may never hear a response but we do trust that God works for our benefit – to keep hope alive.

Let us look upon the Afghanistan teachers, the booksellers dealing in banned books, our blanket tie-ers, the stockers of the Blessing Box, literally everyone we meet as the grace givers of our world. We know God moves through the world giving grace freely. May we be givers and receivers of this marvelous gift.

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