

5.26.24

Series: Stories Around the Campfire

Scripture: Exodus 14:4-15 (NLT)

God's Word: Psalm 106:4-12 (NLT)

“Between A Rock and A Hard Place”

Rev. Matthew Anderson

There they were, a tired, worn out, hot, and sweaty mess of a people. Tired of walking, worn out from running from their Egyptian slaveowners, hot from the desert, and all together in a huddled bunch, stuck between the oncoming chariots behind them and the Red Sea in front of them. This a defining moment. Nowhere to run, nowhere to go, their backs up against the wall so to speak, nowhere to turn, nowhere to go.

We've all been there, right? If you're talking in baseball terms we might call it a pickle. Or we might say that our backs are against the wall. We may be in that situation for several reasons, these things are a part of life, health concerns, family struggles, a job change, the loss of a loved one or someone dearest to us, or maybe plans didn't go the way you wanted them to go, among other reasons. And I have to say it happens in the life of the church too. Think of the cloud of grief we've been in the past year or so. The many changes that have taken place. Or look at our denomination with the recent repeal of language as it pertains to our LGBTQIA+ siblings that has caused so many to either leave or join our church.

Can I name this in the room today? There is tension within our congregation and denomination around these recent decisions. However, I want to reiterate, as Pastor Becky did last week, from this place that our local church hasn't changed. We are still living into the statement on the front of our bulletin. The United Methodist Church removed the language surrounding ordination and marriage as pertains to human sexuality, but the decisions related to marriage in the local church reside with the pastor(s) and the congregation sets the policy on building use. I want to say that Becky and I are mindful that there are a variety of beliefs and values that span across the spectrum, and we will always be mindful of our diversity of belief and our unity. But we will not compromise the Gospel of Jesus Christ or the mission he calls us as the church.

Maybe you are feeling all these changes, today and have been for a while, and it may feel like we're pressed up against the wall and have no way out, or we're indecisive on what next steps to take as person, family, congregation, and denomination. You feel you've got to decide to stay or go from our church and the UMC. You may feel sort of like the Israelites in our story right, stuck between a rock and a hard place. Before you make these types of decisions let's look at our story in Exodus and see what we can glean from their situation.

We know what as Paul Harvey used to say, the rest of the story, as it pertains to the Red Sea. God in God's great power provides a way. The Red Sea parts for the Israelites to pass through and they are saved from an impossible situation again. Yet, I don't want to focus on the rest of the story but drill down on some simple truths that we can learn from God and Moses from this situation we kind of find ourselves in as a people like the Israelites. There are some basic truths that we can pull from our passage today that can

help us when we feel like our backs are against the wall or we are in a spot where we feel there is no way forward. Let's look at verses 14-15 more closely to see what we learn from the commands God gives Moses and the Israelites.

Don't Be Afraid

This is a familiar saying God says to his people especially when they are in need. Most of the time we get ourselves or are in a jam and we're afraid of what is going to happen next. We're afraid of the unknown, afraid to not be in control. But God throughout history says, "don't be afraid, I'm here, I've got this!" Those folks were terrified, and you know what happens when we're scared right? We get in to what psychologists call catastrophizing. We start to think of the worst-case scenario. In the Israelites case here, they think they are about to die. They've got no place to go, and an angry mob of Egyptians are on their tail and a sea in front of them.

And that's when we start to turn on each other in times like this right? We're scared, using our twisted imagination, and not thinking clearly. So, we blame anyone else we can. They cry out to God for help and said to Moses, "we were better off in Egypt, did we have to come all this way just to die here? It was better when we were slaves, we told you so. We were right." Does that sound familiar to our situation within the church? NO, the church would never do that right? Please sense my sarcasm!

Friends, here's the truth, "when we give into our fears, unfounded or not, we lose perspective" Just think what God had already done for the Israelites for them to be where they are in our story. God had helped them all along the way, but they had forgot about that in their pickle. Think about the 10 plagues, the Passover, the fact that they were led by a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night, just to name the recent things. Their fear blinded them so they couldn't see any way God would help them. Their fear stunted their faith, just as it does for ours. "Fear is the antithesis of faith. Fear paralyzes our spirits! Diminishes our ability to trust God and prevents us from taking steps of faith!"

But Moses says, "stand back and watch what God is going to do! The Lord himself is going to fight for you! God is going to make a way where there is no way! If you're willing to trust in God, watch and see what happens." And as their fears start to subside, they can finally hear the next words Moses gives them from God.

Stand Firm in Place and in Your Faith

I think far too often in these rock and hard place situations we resign ourselves that we have no control, and the worst is going to happen, and so we just don't try any more, we walk away. Yet, in this situation Moses reminds the Israelites to stand firm in the place they are at and trust in God. God's going to rescue you and fight for you.

Time and time again throughout the Bible we see God providing something humanity thought impossible, possible. God provides. Remember Daniel was told to stop praying to his God and was thrown into the lion's den, and God shut the mouths of those lions and protected Daniel. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego didn't back down from the call to stop worshipping their God and were thrown into a fiery furnace only to be joined by another in the fire who saved them from the flames. In the New Testament we hear of Peter and Andrew who were admonished to stop talking about what they'd seen and heard about

Jesus or suffer punishment. Even in the face of all these things, these heroes of the faith stood firm in their faith. Sometimes in the face tough times we're uncertain of the future as a people, as a church, and even as a denomination. Yet, Moses reminds us as he did the Israelites, stand in place, stand firm and what the Lord rescue you! Stand firm your faith, in God's promise to be with us and God's Word, stand firm in called to live out the Greatest Commandment to Love God with our whole, heart, soul, mind and strength but also to Love our Neighbor as ourselves.

Be Still (Just Stay Calm)

Hurry up and wait. Just stay calm. Moses tells the Israelites. Sounds super helpful in these types of stressful situations. (Again, this is sarcasm) "Calm down, Moses, don't you see the Egyptians are about crush us, we're trusting in God, but we've got to do something fast!" We've got to do something! Wait, no way, that's not in our human nature nor in the Israelites at this moment. Calm down, also easier said than done because we want to remedy every uncomfortable situation. We want to stop whatever is happening, we've got to do something!

There is wisdom in this call to just stay calm. God is speaking through Moses in this time as he has done time and again throughout the scriptures, "Be still!" That call to calm down is for our own benefit because we often mess things up if we act impulsively. Our own need to react and act often exacerbates our situation and makes it even worse. Yet, God calls in this and many other situations for us to "just calm down" and be still. Psalm 146 reminds us, "Be Still and know that I am God."(and you are not) Isaiah reminds us that those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength on wings like eagles, they will grow weary or faint. And as we heard last week at Pentecost, Jesus tells his disciples to wait the 10 days for the coming of the Holy Spirit and in the waiting, God provides the promise Holy Spirit blowing through the room they were into

the streets where all could experience it. And we are in this place because those first disciples were still, listened to Jesus and waited for the Holy Spirit. This waiting and calmness in the eye of a storm is an extension of our faith and trust in God.

Get Moving! (Move On!)

After Moses has reminded the people to not be afraid, to stand still, and to stay calm, God now says in verse 15, "why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to get moving!" It's almost like God said, quit praying and move on! Now hear me on this, there is always...always time for prayer, fasting, and discernment but there is also a time to move! And I feel as Becky shared, now is that time.

Notice the direction the Israelites are called to go, forward! "There is only one direction which God calls his people to go and that is forward! Retreat is not in the vocabulary of God's Kingdom! Did you ever notice that the rearview mirror in our cars is much smaller than the windshield, that is for a reason. We can't move to where God wants us to be by looking backward! No God calls us to move, move forward in our faith, forward in mission and ministry, forward in making disciples, and forward by putting God's love in action! And to focus on these things not on where we were but to where we God is calling

us to go! “God calls to move from where we are to a place where God is longing to bring us as a people, as a church, as a denomination.”

How? As a UMC pastor Rev. Randy Frye shared we, “go forward from the spot where God has placed us, along the place God guides, by the light which God shines for us, with the provisions God has given us, to the place God has prepared for us.”

We have come to the edge of our own Red Sea, we as a people, church, and denomination feel our backs are against the wall. Some of us may feel we have nowhere to go because we’re grieving Pastor Mike, we’re dealing with the change in our youth program, there’s been a change in our denomination, among other personal battles with health, mental illness, spiritual attacks, and financial difficulties.

So, what do we do when we feel like we’re between a rock and a hard place? When we perceive there is no way forward! We take a step of faith! We move forward even when we don’t know how it’s going to go or happen. God is calling all of us to take that step forward to continue to move forward, to move on because God promises that God will provide a way. God provides a way when there is no way!

Friends, let us not be afraid! Let us stand firm in our faith and on God’s promise to never leave us or forsake us. Let’s stay calm and be still and wait on the Lord! And “together let’s move forward from where we are to where God desires us to be.”

Amen.