

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
September 24, 2017

“A Reluctant Advance”

“... The whole congregation of the
Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron
in the wilderness.”
Exodus 16:2

PRELUDE

As a people,
we are often reluctant to follow
where the Spirit of the living God
would lead us.

As a people,
we are often reluctant to advance the life
as designed and desired by God.

This is, in part, the theme
I want to address this morning:
our reluctance to follow where bidden;
our reluctance to accede to
the good/the grace
God sets before us.

An old hymn came to mind this week -
“He Leadeth Me, O Blessed Thought”
(*Pilgrim Hymnal*, No. 370),
written by a prominent Baptist professor/teacher,
Joseph Gilmor, when our nation was engaged in
its great Civil War (1863).

**Lord, I would clasp thy hand in mine,
Nor ever murmur nor repine;
Content, whatever lot I see,
Since 'tis my God that leadeth me.**

That's strong, unwavering sentiment.
Following the leader without murmur,

without repine. Repine - that's
a lost word in my Microsoft Dictionary.
Repine - **“to feel dejection,
to express discontent; to fret.”**

I confess, I aspire to lead a life of
faith, hope, trust in the God who calls
and gathers us this morning.
But my faith is a fragile matter;
often I repine, I fret and stew
over how to advance,
when the advance
 isn't easy.
I repine when I can't see
what God sees in me;
when I can't see or imagine
 what God has in store.

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For the past few weeks our
scripture lessons have been
based in the book of Exodus,
the book biblical scholar R. Alan Cole called
“the centre of the Old Testament.”
If the center of the Old Testament, then Exodus,
the story of Israel going out of Egypt
 and into promised land,
is essential reading to understand
 our New Testament literature,
where its influence is quite profound.

When we enter Exodus,
we encounter enduring themes
 that define our lives,
themes that have been transmitted
 through many generations,
themes that have been **“reminted”**
 (a term employed by Gerhard Van Rad);

reinterpreted, so as to be
“made relevant in up-to-date preaching”
(see Van Rad, *Old Testament Theology*,
p. 4).

When we read in Exodus,
we are not reading history;
we are in a record of where
various traditions and sources
have been stitched, quilted if you will,
into a coherent pattern of
interpretation,
weathered by time and prayer,
expressing the faith core
that has long sustained
God's people.

History is **“the dress for a truth”**
to which Israel adhered:

God - our help in ages past;
God - our hope for years to come;
God - working to elevate,
to save and redeem,
a reluctant humanity.

Themes contained in Exodus:

(1)

God is aware and seeks to remedy
a human condition that is full of misery.
**“I know (the) sufferings (of my people),
and I have come down to deliver them.”**

(2)

God employs people to remediate
the conditions that cause
humanity to suffer, that evoke
God's compassion.

Call this a stratagem of indirect intervention.
God doesn't appear center stage - rather God

resides in the wings, enlisting people
to help people
in need.

God liberates by sending a liberator (Moses);
indeed, we might say God works by committee
or task force (Moses, Aaron, Miriam, etc.).

(3)

In Exodus, there is an juxtaposition of
God's creative will and desire for order,
a social, civil, and spiritual order conducive
for life to flourish; versus the disorder,
the destructive capacity of life when Pharaonic
powers displace and usurp Divine rule,
undoing the creation.

In Exodus, God's compassion duels
Pharaoh's hard heart.

(4)

In Exodus, there is deliverance for humanity,
orchestrated by God; and there exists the
"revolutionary possibility of covenant"
(*New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 685), Vol 1),
living according to God's word, God's law,
which protects us from two extreme alternatives:
authoritarian rule; or,
individual autonomy.

We are a covenant tradition in the UCC.
We honor the first covenant;
we reverence the new covenant -
God with us, in Christ,
in time, now and forever.

(5) in Exodus, God is strangely present with us.
The accent here is evenly distributed:
strangely - present - with us.

The glory of God is variously described.
As cloud by day, pillar of fire by night.
Strange, symbols.

God is the wind that unsettles the sea;
God is lodged on the mountain top;
God is in the storm, in the shaking of the earth;
God's glory is revealed. YET - be careful here.
The glory is not God as seen and heard.
The glory is what is humanly visible,
concealing the fullness of the God who tabernacles with us;
God remains hidden,
 in the cleft of the rock,
 beyond eye to see,
never reducible to an image
manufactured in our mind.

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(6) a final theme - the journey of life
runs through wilderness; in fact,
wilderness is a stage we cannot avoid;
in the wilderness our reluctance is exposed.
We murmur in the wilderness, we repine.

For good reason, I say.

Wilderness is filled with danger.

No streetlights.

No mile markers.

No exits with choice of fast food;
 no gluten-free options,
 no filling stations to Starbuck on.

No curbing to define the road,

no guardrails for the heights,
no signage indicating what
 dangerous curves lie ahead.
In the wilderness the land has not been
 surveyed and divided, marked with
 hedge rows and fence lines.

The wilderness is a “**land unsown;**”
it is raw, untamed, and perilous.

The wilderness introduced in Exodus
becomes embedded in the mind of Israel,
and it gets replayed, again and again –
in Jeremiah (2:6); in the Psalms (78, 136),
in Ezekiel (20) – a scathing indictment
of a people reluctant to advance.

It is a theme in our New Testament – from John’s
chapel set up in the wilderness;
and Jesus having his own season – being tested –
coming to his senses as to what degree
 he trusts in God’s leading;
and Paul also having time – set apart.
Dare we live in accord, or repine,
 apart from the God who
 desires our company?

What happens in the wilderness?
In Exodus there is reluctance to follow
what help God has sent to save the people,
combined with a misinterpretation of the
past the people cannot escape.

As we heard in the lesson this morning –
the people, a month into their freedom journey,
are voicing complaints, pining for a past that
never existed – going after Moses and Aaron
for disturbing their peace. Better servitude
in Egypt than this dread that comes with

freedom, and the daily need for bread.

I hope we see -
there is real fear - real concern
being expressed in this passage.
The people are hungry.
They are frightened and scared,
fretfully so.
They are rather desperate
for some measure of relief,
eager for a system that will assuage the fear
and provide food security.
So they blame Moses/Aaron for their
unsettledness. They fix their feelings
upon their leadership.

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We are quite skilled at fixing blame upon others
when our lives are trouble and weighted with concern.

I heard a story the other day that illustrates, at least in
part, about a devoted partner whose husband was ill;
the partner was steadfast, encouraging, supportive,
for several months really. It was a hard time, taxing of
spirit, a test of endurance.

One day when the ill man was quite alert and lucid,
he motioned for his companion and caretaker to come close.
So she pulled up a chair and leaned in to hear what
he had to say.

“You know,” he said, “you’ve been with me through a slew of
bad times. When I got fired, you stuck with me. When my
business failed, you stood with me. When I gambled away
our savings and then lost the house, you stayed with me.
And even now, with these recent health problems, you are
still by my side. And you know what?”

The companion, quite touched, responded with,
“what, dear?”

He said: **“I think you’re bad luck.”**

We are quite skilled at misinterpreting the
times, misreading the signs, that would
have us advance the life God offers.

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What sense might we make of this?
Permit a couple of thoughts.

Our lesson from Exodus sets forth a pattern
that gets repeated – seemingly down through
the ages. We humans build systems that are
good for some, not good for all. God has
compassion on the left out and left behind,
there is a liberation of the captives, who
then are asked to advance into a future of
God’s making. Yet there is this reluctance
to fully trust, to be content, with what
blessings God has provided today. We get
stuck; we can’t advance.

The wilderness is where we get tested.

Can we get out of Egypt?
Can we get out of old economies
 that foul, pollute, and poison
 into new – that are clean, sustainable?
Can we get out of war, endless war?
Can we be satisfied with simply:
“give us this day, our daily bread?”
Or must we forever scheme, and horde,
for more and more, at the expense of
a neighbor in need?

Like many this week, I've been paying attention to the epic documentary by Ken Burns on the Vietnam War. Eighteen hours of film time, a budget of \$30 million, 10 years in the making. Historians date the end of the Vietnam era to 1975. But that's not so - for "the war" is never over for those who have either fought in it, or who simply fought it.

It was, in the words of Barbara Tuchman, an era of leaders, possessed with a **"limitless capacity for throwing lives away,"** and in that regard it paralleled European leadership in WWI, when there was neither the will nor the imagination to see an alternative to **"escalation."** So 58,000 Americans were killed. Over 3 million Vietnamese.

The **"limitless capacity for throwing lives away."** Tuchman wrote those words in March of 1968. We have been reluctant to advance much beyond that day. We have been reluctant.

Wilderness. Wilderness is a strange gift of God.

No one necessarily chooses wilderness. We get driven into wilderness chapters of life.

A person no more chooses wilderness than a person chooses to have birthdays. They happen - ready or not.

Our God is a great liberator.
It is in God's nature to free the captives,
to release the bound.
And then there is wilderness,
a time of testing, when we are free
to determine - to choose - whether or not
to advance in keeping with divine design,
within the possibility of covenant,
and new creation,
and the gift of a future
where the creation of rightly ordered.

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Perry Miller, noted scholar of colonial America,
who called our Pilgrim forbearers "**reluctant
voyagers.**" They came unto this land,
dutifully obliged, for they were not welcome
in the homeland they much preferred. Once
here, they strove to make the best of their lot.
Indeed, they conceived of life in terms of being
in a wilderness. The Rev. Samuel Danforth
preached a sermon in 1670, wherein he developed
the theme: "Errand in the Wilderness."

Mission - here.
Purpose - here.
Choice - here.
Sent - here.
In the wilderness.
And in this wilderness of today,
God provides. God sustains.
God nourishes us.

The Exodus lesson sets before us a hard lesson.
When presented with God's future - they repined.
They complained, even as God provided
for their daily needs.
God sustained and cared with mercy - and

bread sufficient for day.

We tell this story knowing that
God has come to us.

And we pray:
may we be willing, trusting,
to advance.

May we trust in the God ever so near,
wanting and working for our good,
wanting and yearning that we
follow wherever God is inclined to lead.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*