

Grace And Glory For Your Journey
Exodus 16:1-10 - Romans 8:18-30
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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For almost fifty years Norman Vincent Peale was the pastor of the Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. He was a powerful speaker and always told inspiring stories about men and women who faced great odds but with hard work and God's grace overcame their difficulties.

One Sunday Dr. Peale told the congregation about a young, gifted musician with a brilliant career before him. But his dreams came to a screeching halt when a freak accident crushed one of his hands. One specialist doubted the young musician would ever be able to use it again. His career was finished. But the young man refused to quit! He kept going from doctor to doctor until one gave him a slim chance for recovery. He was told if he worked hard and was willing to endure the pain, maybe, just maybe, his hand could be rehabilitated.

From that point on the young man poured his heart and soul into rehabilitating his useless hand. Dr. Peale also dramatically communicated the young man's burgeoning faith journey leading him to place his hand in the hands of the Good Physician. I'm sure you've already guessed the outcome, after months of agonizing struggle, physically, mentally and spiritually, he regained full use of his hand and fulfilled his teacher's prediction of having a brilliant career.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Here's the punch line: Dr. Peale concluded by saying..."And today that brave young man is the organist here at the Marble Collegiate Church..." Without skipping a beat the pipes of that magnificent organ swelled into the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

While this young man's story is both dramatic and heroic, if you think about it, the ebb and flow of his journey fits the universal template. All of us experience unexpected and unwelcomed disruptions in our lives and have to learn how to cope with the new reality dealt us.

Usually when these disruptions occur, our first reaction is panic. Everything that once gave a sense of structure is suddenly snatched away. The old is finished and gone, behold (whether you like it or not) the new has come. But after the initial shock, with the support of friends and by the grace of God, we can reach deep within ourselves and pull out all the courage, faith and we vision need to tap into God's grace and, if it's God's will, overcome our difficulties.

Secularly speaking, that young man was lucky. He found the right doctors, a great support system, and with all these people working together was healed.

But what if his hand didn't respond to the therapy? What if his dreams to be a great musician were dashed to bits? Would his story be less heroic and more tragic? The answer could only be, "No," if his journey through the wilderness inwardly transformed him. Even if he failed to regain the use of his hand, but came out of it understanding his life is squarely in the palm of God's hand, even then, his would be an inspiring story.

You see, ultimately, what really counts is what we already have hidden deep in our souls. Of course, I'm speaking of grace, love, faith and hope, those hallmarks of Christian character enabling us to do and be more than we ever felt possible, because in times of crisis and disruption, we can still sense the glory that brings us first to the foot of the cross, but ultimately first to the door of the empty tomb. God turns defeat into victory and makes his victory our's as well.

This is one of the essential lessons of the Christian life. It's easy to experience glory during the best of times, but it's a real blessing to claim glory especially during the worst of times.

That was the Hebrew's experience as they made their way to the Promised Land after their escape from Egypt. Like the young musician in Dr. Peale's story, they too, were on a multi-layered journey. Their outward journey was political and societal. They were liberated slaves searching for a new way of life, but on a deeper level, they were especially on a spiritual inward journey, searching for a new way of life. Before they were slaves. Now it was time to shed their slave mentality and learn for the first time what it meant to be God's People. If their pilgrimage was to be successful, before they entered the Promised Land, they too had to be inwardly transformed, and learn what it means to above all else trust God.

But of all the really important lessons in life this would be the hardest to learn. Trusting God's faithfulness and responding with your own never comes naturally, it takes years of commitment and experience. That's why the Hebrews were in the wilderness for 40 years.

Whenever you see the number 40 in the Bible, interpret it to mean a long time of preparation. For instance, Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days as he prepared himself for his public ministry. And the Hebrews were in the wilderness for 40 years as God prepared them for the Promised Land.

But, unlike Jesus in the wilderness, the Hebrews fought God every step of the way. We read, "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses in the Wilderness." They said, "If only we died in Egypt when we sat by the flesh pots, and ate our fill of bread, but you brought us out into this wilderness to kill us with hunger."

This was a recurring pattern. The people always complained but God always answered with grace. In this case the people complained of hunger. So, God sent them manna from heaven, just enough food to keep them going one day at a time, no more, no less. In this way the Hebrews learned to trust God would provide their daily bread. Even so, the people still complained. Maybe God gave them what they needed, but not what they wanted. That's why they kept looking back to Egypt, fondly but falsely, recalling the good life they never had, conveniently forgetting how miserable they really were.

That's why at the right moment God instructed Moses to prepare the people to receive a memorable sign assuring them they were moving in the right direction and the time for looking back was over.

In our nation's history the first 150 years were spent moving westward as we fulfilled what was called our "Manifest Destiny." Well, unlike us, for the Hebrews their past, in Egypt, was to the west. Their future, their destiny, was in the east. That's why God instructed Moses to get the people to face east, into the wilderness, into the unknown, to see something wonderful happen. The glory of God appeared in the clouds.

One interpretation of this heavenly manifestation is Moses got the people up early and had them face east to see the sun rise gloriously through the morning clouds symbolizing the dawn of a new day. But whatever they saw as they looked eastward into the wilderness, they experienced a sign from heaven inspiring them to push on. Of course this sign didn't mean the struggle was over, but it was a timely reminder God was with them every step of the way.

I hope you find truth in their story and identify with their experience. There are times we find ourselves trudging through the wilderness up to our necks in trouble. And then there are those "in between times" when our day to day challenges keep us from completely resting on our laurels. But whatever the time, no matter how you feel physically, emotionally, or spiritually at any given moment, know this: whether you realize it or not, you live out each day in God's eternal presence and when you know enough to open yourself to that presence you find grace and glory.

I don't know where most of you are in your life journey this morning, but I'm sure no one here, or anywhere is ever completely satisfied. St. Augustine summed up the human experience in a short prayer, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until we rest in you."

Even if you live in the same house in the same town all your life, you are still on a journey sometimes taking you up into the highest mountains, other times down into the deepest valleys, but always with the promise you never walk alone. Of course God is with us, but remember what I said last week as well, "We" are the Body of Christ. "We" are the Church. God gathers us into

community with him and each other for mutual encouragement and when necessary to carry each other's burdens.

I also said last week our most valuable resource is ourselves. Look around you and see the resources God has given you in the faces of our church family. Yes, we are here for Christ and the mission he gives us, but just as God is here for us, we are also here for each other, to be reflections of God's very present help in times of struggle.

I remind you of these things because like that young musician who struggled for the reclamation of his hand and the Hebrews who struggled those 40 years in the wilderness, we too share in the same real life struggles, and if you look long and hard, you too can sense God inviting us to share with each other that deeper faith that always leads to hope and glory. For that reason alone the struggle is worth it.

I encourage you to think and pray about these things. And as we join together to support one another, keep your eyes open and see God at work in this place, in our lives and in those we touch.

Let us pray!