

March 20, 2016

If I am being honest, when we began our journey through Exodus, I imagined we would follow the Israelites through their desert journey, I imagined we would be much further along than we've come. I originally imagined that we would walk with them through their wilderness experience as they made their way towards the Promised Land, ending with the promise realized. Brining us back to the anticipation of Moses' vision from his mountaintop, to the anticipation of the transfigured Christ. Instead as we celebrate Jesus' triumphal journey into Jerusalem, we also celebrate the Hebrew's triumphal exit from Egypt, as they kick the dust of slavery off their feet. Instead we leave Lent, and the Israelites still have so much further to go, their long wandering, desert journey still lies before them and their bitter slavery behind them. And we read this text as Jesus is entering Jerusalem, with palms waving but with so much still before Him. So what I am saying, is while this is not what I planned, this is better.

We have followed the Israelites along their long journey towards freedom. We have listened to their bitter cries to the God they believed had abandoned them. We watched as Moses was restored from the man he contented himself to be, a man broken and hidden, to be a man able to lead his people towards God's restoration and redemption. We have seen as God tore down the old Creation. But now that is all over, the people are no longer defined by their slavery, they are the people God has rescued, the people who are free to worship and enjoy their God. They are free to follow their God into forty years of wandering, into forty years of doubts and complaints where they must rely solely on their God to be their only source of sustaining freedom. They are free to follow their God exactly where they do not want to go. The text tells us that God did not lead them by the Philistine route, instead leading the people a roundabout way. The Philistine route went right up along the Mediterranean, and would have led them right

into the Promised Land. This route was well traveled, it had plenty of food and water, but this is not where God led the people. God did not lead the people by the route that is well worn, the route that makes sense, instead leading them by a way that would not make sense. Instead God leads them south to the Red Sea. A route that is unknown, barren and empty. God takes them to where there are no resources, there is only danger. And the people are left wondering, aren't we further south than we should be? How scenic is this route?

This is how we find ourselves with the Israelites on the shore of the Red Sea. God has led the people out of Egypt, not in a way that makes sense, but to the banks of a sea they cannot cross. And as they look across the Red Sea, all they see on the other side is a lot of lonely desert. The Lord even tells Moses that Pharaoh will believe that they are wandering aimlessly, that the wilderness has closed in around them. To anyone who knows the way out of Egypt, the Israelites appear to be lost and floundering, unable to escape the land that has kept them prisoner. Suddenly it does not seem like the Israelites are led by their God, maybe not even to the Israelites. This may feel like a wonderful metaphor in your life, it may even feel like a perfect metaphor for your faith journey, you may find that you are all out of resources, and are in a place that has none to provide. You may feel like you are wandering aimlessly, coming to services each Sunday, hoping to find your way. Hoping that you will see your own pillar of smoke and fire to guide you through the unknown. You may begin to wonder if there really is a Promised Land at the end of the journey, if there is actually something beyond this endless desert. You wonder why we are south of where we thought we should be, why have you not made it to the point in this sermon series that you thought you would be. You wonder why God never takes the way of the Philistines.

When we find Jesus in our Lukan text, in a story we are so familiar with, He has ordered His disciples to go and find a young donkey that has never been ridden. As Jesus rode this donkey into the city, the people threw their palms and their cloaks before Him, as we witness the dramatic exit of the Hebrews, we witness the dramatic entrance into Jerusalem by Jesus. We witness people who believe their freedom is at hand. But Jesus does not ride in, in a way we would expect. Sure, Jesus is not entering a militaristic king, He is not riding in with a conquering army atop a white steed but with a band of ragtag followers atop an animal that is far too small. This scene is as comical as it is majestic, and we have heard this all before. But it really feels that God is again taking the way of the Philistines.

At the Christmas event, Jesus is proclaimed king, and thirty three years later the people are still living under Roman oppression, and peace on earth still seems so far off. Jesus has announced the Kingdom of God, the Promised Land for the poor and the poor of spirit, but we still seem so far south of where we are meant to be. The king that we are promised is just now riding into the city, He is just now being hailed as the king who comes in the name of the Lord. But He is far from the king of kings, He seems to only be the king of a few dusty and dreary Israelites. As those who have heard the good news that the Kingdom of God has come, that it has been ushered in by Christ, we are still waiting for its full realization. In many ways we, so much time later, are still waiting for the kingdom whose king we announce with palms every year. We are still farther south than we thought we would be by now. We are still wandering and waiting, wondering what it is that we can do to help it along. We are waiting from our freedom, waiting to be called out of our slavery, led by our king who rides before us. Even with this triumphal entrance, it still seems like we need to go so much further. It seems that we are entering the wild unknown with shouts of joy.

When we return to the Exodus story, Pharaoh has decided to pursue the Hebrews, to revoke their freedom. When the Israelites saw the Egyptian army drawing near to them, when they were almost on top of them, they cried out to Moses “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have brought us out to die in the wilderness”. In their fear they cry out to Moses, afraid that their freedom will be short lived, wondering if it would be better to live in slavery than to die in freedom. Moses tries to calm the Lord’s flock, telling them “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today...you only have to keep still”.

This is the end of their story in slavery and the beginning of their freedom story, the people are wandering, so they can head off to a land they know nothing about, and they certainly don’t know how to get there. The people are complaining, which is a phrase that comes up in the Exodus story over and over again. It would be really easy to be dismissive of their complaints, but the subtext of all their complaints, all of our complaints, is fear. They are afraid and then right when they look over their shoulders and see Pharaoh and his armies barreling towards them. They see their anxieties, the thing they thought they left behind quickly coming towards them, ready to steal away the freedom they just received. They see their fears realized. And they look to Moses, hoping that he will do something. But Moses does not go off and challenge Pharaoh, and he does not build a bridge for the people to cross the Sea, all he says is stand firm and you will see the deliverance of the Lord. When the Hebrews are facing overwhelming odds, when the world seems to be crumbling around them, Moses says don’t just do something, stand there. Stand firm and you will see.

Moses declares to the Israelites that all they have to do is keep still, because God has promised to lead them to a place called freedom. While some may have been ready to dig a hole

to die in, others preparing to run, and others preparing to fight, Moses tells them all that all they have to do is be still, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish. While they, like all of us, may want to do something, to participate in their deliverance in some way, Moses tells them to just be still. Moses tells them that freedom comes from the inside out, when it seems like you are going to be overcome by adversity, loneliness, uncertainty, when your only certainty is that you are in way over your head, when it seems like you have left all of your other dreams in the wilderness you discover the only dream left is that God will be with you. That God will be your deliverance, when you can do nothing but stand firm. Moses tells them, you are not truly free until you learn the sufficiency of God plus nothing. Just God plus nothing, those are the people who are truly free, those are the people who have entered the Promised Land. The lesson they learn is that all they have to do is nothing, absolutely nothing, to be free. God has given them their freedom, without any participation from the people, God has led them this roundabout way to the shores of the Red Sea and God is going to deliver them from the Egyptians. The people have to learn as they take their first steps into the wilderness that it is God plus nothing that will sustain them, now, in the desert, and for the rest of time.

As we wave our palms, so many years, so many centuries later, we still have to learn that God, this man riding an animal that is too small, plus nothing brings us freedom. God plus nothing brings us out of our desert wandering, God plus nothing brings about the Kingdom of God. We follow Christ towards the cross on Good Friday, a day that will be clouded in darkness, a day that stands in contrast to our Palm Sunday joy. We follow as the world seems to be crumbling around us, as our God is led to the cross. We follow not just remembering the fickleness of those who waved those first palms but learning this same lesson over again. That we face our own desert, our own enslavement, our own Roman oppression, and we declare that

all we have to do is stand firm and see. Stand firm and see what God is about to do for us, because the Good News is not the fickleness of the crowds or our own, the Good News is that all we have to do is stand firm and witness what is about to happen. Even as the odds seem to be against us, and the king we hailed is arrested and put to death, we only need to stand firm and see.

All we have to know is that even if we were to stand in silence in the presence of our crucified king, even when we stop shouting for joy, even if our voices fail to pronounce the arrival of our king who reigns from the cross, the stones would shout out. And all we have to do is witness, to listen as these stones shout, as this Sea parts before us, as our deliverance is achieved before our eyes. Even though the Kingdom of God still seems so far off, and our paths often seem so uncertain, we go forward relying on God, knowing that God plus nothing will bring about our freedom. We go forward trusting in the God who would ride in on a donkey, the God who would lead us to the Sea, the God who would go to the cross, the God who knows the way even when we seem too far south. We stand firm ready to witness our deliverance. And that is exactly why we wave these palms year after year after year. So stand firm and see the deliverance of our Lord.