

“Following Our Way Forward”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
10-18-20

Based upon Ex. 33:12-23; Acts 15:36-16:10

“Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, a king had a boulder placed in the middle of the road. Then he hid himself and watched to see what people would do. Some wealthy merchants came by and rather than move the stone they simply walked around it, acting as though the boulder in their way had always been there and was meant to be there. Others, when confronted by the boulder in their way, complained and blamed the king for not keeping the road clear, but they did not touch the stone. Finally, a peasant came along carrying a load of vegetables. When his way was blocked, he laid down his load and tried to move the boulder out of the way. At first it didn’t budge. But he pushed and strained and gave it his all, and finally he succeeded. After picking up his load again, he noticed a purse lying in the road where the boulder had been. The purse contained many gold coins and a note from the king which said that the gold was a reward for whoever moved the bolder off of the roadway.”¹

What is the moral of this story? Almost twenty years ago I used this in a sermon to illustrate how God wants us to remove the obstacles on our way to wholeness and joy for ourselves and others, rather than allowing them to stop us in our tracks. I still believe that God wants us to find wholeness and joy, and that many times we allow obstacles to rob us of life by stopping us from learning and growing, or to rob others of opportunity and justice because we leave them in the way because we aren’t affected by them. But recently I saw a meme that’s been circulating on social media that has made me think that the moral of just moving every boulder is a little bit overly simplistic. In the photo, which is on your bulletin cover, a huge alligator blocks a narrow footbridge that would allow someone to cross a churning river. Anybody feel called to push and lift that guy up to see if he’s sitting on a treasure? I don’t think so. The alligator is clearly photo-shopped; yet I still sympathize with the sentiments expressed by whomever created the meme. “Pretty sure this is the bridge you take to get to 2021,” the caption reads.² It certainly feels that way to me much of the time. Does it to you?

The road ahead to 2021 seems fraught with difficulty and challenge, and not the benign boulder kind, which is a pain but ultimately not life-threatening, but the kind of difficulty that bites and snaps and can do serious harm to all of us. The virus is surging in the majority of states again, which suggest a second tragic wave is coming; hurricanes are spawning so frequently in the Gulf that meteorologists now have had to resort to using Greek letters instead of baby names to identify them, and their victims have no time to rebuild between them; fires are still burning in the west; small businesses are still struggling everywhere; racial injustice is still causing suffering and turmoil; the Supreme Court hearings have magnified our already toxic divisiveness and worry about the future and human freedoms, and of course there is the election— one that looms larger than any other election I have ever experienced in terms of its potential consequences. Everyone in the nation and the world will be watching what happens in the weeks following November 3rd. The year 2020 has already been brutal, and yet all of this still lies ahead

¹ Ulfang 13, *Short Stories with Moral Lessons*, Wattpad,
<https://www.wattpad.com/464723676-short-stories-with-moral-lessons-the-king%27s>.

² See e.g. “Animals”, I Can Has Cheezburger.com at <https://cheezburger.com/9562555904/at-this-point-wed-believe-it>

of us to deal with before we can cry out “Happy New Year” while praying fervently that it will actually be one in 2021.

These are not problems that we can just simply push out of the way, nor do I believe that they are problems that our king, Jesus Christ, had dropped in front of us to teach us a lesson or lead us to treasure. So, how do we find our way forward in faith without being eaten by cosmic alligators or staying stuck forever where we are? Unfortunately, I can’t offer you any cute stories which will suddenly make getting through all of this feel like a breeze. But I do think that today’s scripture lessons give us important food for thought as we contemplate how to proceed. In both of today’s stories, the main characters find themselves in tough spots. Like us, they know they have to move forward, but it isn’t at all obvious how to do so.

It’s not evident from today’s excerpt from *Exodus*, but Moses’ conversation with God takes place after it appeared that the Israelites dream for the future had fallen apart. No sooner had God liberated them from Egypt, offered them a covenant’s worth of special privileges including the promise of land flowing with milk and honey, the people turned around and violated their promises by worshiping a golden calf. It was such an outrageous betrayal that God wanted to destroy the people at first. Moses persuaded God to relent, but one of the horrible consequences of their sin was that God didn’t feel like going with the people to the Promised Land after that. “I’ll send an angel to show you the way, and you can still have the land I promised,” God basically says. “But I’m not going to be present with you anymore because you make me so angry, I would destroy you.” Up until this point, everything Moses did was grounded in the assurance that Yahweh would be with him. But now Moses was looking at a future that involved months of wandering in the wilderness with a bunch of disobedient and difficult people without the God who had saved them. He would have to navigate them through hostile nations, leading them in battle although he was no warrior, and somehow take over occupied territory so that Israel could become a nation, all without the God who knew how to do all of that safely. How could he possibly do that?

Paul, too, was in a difficult spot. According to the story, God was involved in blocking his way too. The problems all began with a difference of opinion he had with his missionary travel-buddy Barnabas. Barnabas wanted another apostle called John Mark to join them on their new trip. Paul thought he was too inexperienced and unreliable. They got into a big ugly fight about it with each man thinking the other was being stubborn and prideful. Finally, they split up. Barnabas and John Mark headed off in one direction, and Paul in another. This was a hugely painful moment, but Paul tried to rally and move on anyway. He picked a new partner, Silas, and then together they added Timothy, the young man I spoke about in September who was very enthusiastic but very green. They set out trying to gel as a team, but then the Holy Spirit started putting up still more roadblocks. We heard about these on Confirmation Sunday in the context of Lydia’s story because it was to her that the Spirit ultimately led Paul. But today’s text precedes that one. Paul wanted to go to Asia. The Spirit said “no.” Then he tried to go to Mysia. “No” again. Fed up and frustrated, Paul and his team found themselves stuck nursing their grief and worry in the commercial town of Troas. First his old buddy wouldn’t agree with him on the way forward and now the Spirit wouldn’t either. Was Paul’s ministry over? Had he lost God’s endorsement too? Paul wasn’t sure how to proceed.

Before we get to what these exemplars of the faith did in these difficult circumstances, it is worth just sitting a minute with the knowledge that both of them faced significant challenges and obstacles on their journeys. We need to keep this in mind because as pastor/author Michael Lindvall has observed, “Much of Christian piety over the years, even today, has presented faith as an escape route out of life and its troubles.”³ That’s unfortunate because neither the Old nor the New Testaments presents faith or God’s promises this way. Again and again the stories show people of faith facing hardship and being challenged by great obstacles even when God was with them. So, we mustn’t convince ourselves that the presence of problems means the absence of God or means that our faith is inadequate. Challenges come with life. Faith helps us to deal with them, not to escape them.

Paul found his way forward by continuing to listen to the Spirit. But whereas he was content to hear from God in a dream and trust that God would reveal the way, something not all of us can do, Moses, like many of us, wanted more in the way of assurance. Even if God pointed him in the right direction, Moses was not prepared to move one step forward toward the Promised Land without God accompanying them because he knew the people’s survival depended upon God’s presence with them. “You’ve got to be present with us!” Moses insisted. “If I’ve found favor in your sight, then you have to show us the way.” “OK,” God says, “I’ll be present with you.” “No, I’m serious,” Moses continues as if he hasn’t heard God’s response. “You have to be present with us.” “I’ll do as you ask,” God says again with great patience. But instead of comforting him, that response only gives Moses an idea. “OK,” he says. “I ask to see your glory.” “I can’t give you what you want,” God explains, “or you’ll die. But you can see where my glory has been.” Then God sticks Moses in a cleft in a rock, passes by, and allows him to see God’s back.

We talked a bit in my class this week about the symbolism this marvelous anthropomorphism of God conveys. If Moses could see only God’s back, then that put him solidly in the position of follower, not leader. He had been trying to cast himself as God’s equal wanting to see God face to face, and God gently put him back in his place. But in this case, I think it isn’t what Moses saw, but what he heard, that can help us to find our way forward. When God explains the plan before putting Moses in the cleft in the rock, God says that the glory which will pass before Moses will consist of God’s goodness, grace, and mercy. These things will have the effect of proclaiming the name of the Lord, which you might remember from a few weeks ago means among other things “I am the ground of all being. What I will happens, and I will to be with you.” Thus, in effect, God tells Moses “If you want the assurance that I am with you, look for signs of my goodness. If you want to feel that I am with you, embrace my graciousness and mercy.” God leaves a glorious trail of goodness and righteousness and reliability and steadfast love like breadcrumbs for Moses to follow. If we follow that trail too, then we also follow the one who knows how to get us to where we need to go.

Paul found God’s trail of glorious breadcrumbs when he stopped trying to be in charge of his missionary travels and judging his fellow missionaries, and let God be in charge instead. After he had hunkered down in a motel in Troas for a while, God came to him in a dream telling

³ Lindvall, Michael, L., The Christian Life: A Geography of God (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), 46.

him to go to see a man in Macedonia. Interestingly, as we know from studying Lydia's story a few weeks ago, it wasn't really a man God wanted Paul to see, but a woman. But whether Paul misunderstood his dream or God knew that Paul wouldn't have listened if he thought a woman was calling him doesn't matter. What matters is that when Paul left Troas, he was content to look at the back of God, instead of trying to take the lead. God led Paul to Lydia, he accepted her as God's intended recipient, and the rest is history.

I don't know what the near future holds any more than you do, and although I am a person of deep faith, I am at least as worried about it as you are, maybe more, because I am a worrier by nature. But whatever lies ahead, be it alligators or boulders, we will find our way to God's future with hope by clinging to goodness and the knowledge that God loves us and wills to be with us. There may be times when God's goodness calls on us to push the boulders of injustice or social limitations out of the way, as Paul did when he baptized Lydia and creating a church through her. There may also be times when God's goodness calls us to walk very quietly around the sleeping alligator and take a different bridge. *Exodus* makes clear that God did not lead Moses and the Israelites on the most direct route to the Promised Land. They wandered this way and that for ages before they finally made it to their new home. This tells us that the safest way forward isn't necessarily the fastest, it's the one that is most faithful. If we want to get to God's future with hope safely, therefore, we have to follow, not lead. In your minds' eye, try to see Jesus walking in front of you, and then step where and how he steps: "*Right foot goodness, left foot grace; right foot mercy, left foot love.*" Don't panic and start worshiping idols who make empty promises just because you feel trapped in a dangerous wilderness. Don't despair if the pandemic is making you feel like you are stuck in a motel room in Troas drinking bad coffee and wondering if you'll ever be able to leave. Rest and pay attention to how your dreams and God's dreams intersect, with the faith of one who knows through Christ that God's not done with us yet.

In the middle of World War II, when one of his friends, Paul Tillich, had reacted to the horrors of the war in Germany by fleeing to build a new life in the States, and another one of his friends, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, had left the States to return to Germany to take a stand against Hitler, the great preacher and Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr, who was also a German American contemplating what to do, preached a sermon in Massachusetts about finding serenity in the face of challenge. The prayer with which he ended his sermon has since been edited and distributed all over the world. The first part, which was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous as "the Serenity Prayer," was originally written:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.⁴

⁴ Cheever, Susan, "*The Secret History of the Serenity Prayer*," The Fix, March 6, 2016, retrieved from <https://www.thefix.com/content/serenity-prayers-desperate-origins-Niebuhr-Bonhoeffer-Tillich9965#:~:text=So%20it%20may%20come%20as,itself%20during%20World%20War%20II.>

You can hear in this prayer the tension Niebuhr felt as he looked to the unknown future. At that time, the German extermination of the Jews was still ongoing. The tide had turned against the Third Reich, but it was not yet clear to the world that that had happened. Which boulders needed to be moved? Which routes had to be changed? His prayer was both powerful and faithful. But what many people don't know is that the original prayer did not end there. Niebuhr continued:

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.⁵

We need these words as much as the first, for when we live one day at a time, surrendered to God's will, then like Moses from the cleft of the rock, we discover that our way forward becomes clear. All we have to do is follow the one who wills to be with us, and leaves us a trail of goodness, grace, and mercy so that we can find our way. Whether that trail will lead us over, under, or around or through the obstacles ahead, we can't know now. But we can know through Christ that God's way is the best way forward. Thanks be to God for not giving up on us despite our disobedience, and for promising always to show us the way. Amen.

⁵ *"The Serenity Prayer with Full Version and Original Full Version,"* The Prayer Foundation, https://www.prayerfoundation.org/dailyoffice/serenity_prayer_full_version.htm