

One Who Follows

Exodus 13:17-22, Matthew 4:18-25

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I hope you will indulge my departure from the lectionary today – while I'm generally a fan of the lectionary, because we all could use a little more discipline in reading more of the Bible and not just our favorite stories – I'll also go off of the lectionary when I'm feeling especially inspired, when the occasion seems to call for something specific, or for series of sermons that hopefully address things that are especially important to you, that relate to our life together, and teach us more about what it means to be Christians – and United Methodist Christians, at that – in this day and in this place. But today, I just had to go with Exodus. I just had to go with Moses.

Exodus is my favorite book of the Bible and Moses is my favorite Biblical character. The stories of the exodus are just so rich and complex, and Moses is so real. He's no David, slaying a giant with a slingshot. He's no Daniel, living through the fiery furnace and the lion's den. He's no Jesus, of course – he's just a regular guy, who makes mistakes and gets upset and argues with God and doubts and learns and lives. Despite the fact that he parted a sea with his staff and made water come from a rock, he's a guy I feel like I can relate to. Because what makes him a hero of biblical proportions is something we all can do, if we would be so bold: when the God of all creation asked him to both lead and follow, he said 'yes.'

And of course you already know the story: the Israelites, God's chosen people, were enslaved in Egypt, and God called Moses, a sinner!, to go and stand up to Pharaoh to liberate the Israelites. It took ten plagues worth of convincing, but finally Pharaoh said 'ok' and Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea on their way to Canaan, the Promised Land, the land

flowing with milk and honey. But before they got there, the group wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

In the desert they encountered all kinds of things: fights with the locals who were delivered to them by God, hunger and thirst which were quenched by manna from heaven and water from a rock, fights and unfaithfulness and all kinds of doubt, but somehow Moses kept them following, Moses kept them together. Through it all, Moses did his best to be faithful.

The text that we heard this morning is a helpful reminder to me, because I often think about the Israelites, who did more than their fair share of complaining while on this journey, as wandering in the wilderness for 40 years simply because they didn't know where they were going or perhaps because their faith wasn't strong enough. But Exodus 13 tells us that God, in God's wisdom, *led* them on this route. The 40 years of wandering was 40 years of faithfulness, 40 years of purpose.

Now I don't propose to be a leader like Moses – while I have all of the 'realness' of Moses, the mistakes, the doubts, the regrets – I don't propose to have that closest of connections with God that Moses had – and I don't know you all that well yet, but I don't think that you are too much like the griping, fickle Israelites (at least I hope you're not!). I'm not carrying anyone's bones with me like Moses was, we haven't been called to defeat any armies that I know of, and it's *highly* unlikely that I'll be here with you for 40 years, though I suppose with God all things are possible. I'm also not suggesting that this time we have together will all feel like wilderness wandering, so don't get nervous about that. But I do think that there are some similarities between this story from Exodus 13 and you and me, the congregation and the new pastor of Browns Point United Methodist Church.

For one thing, we all *are* carrying some proverbial bones. While a new pastor is a fresh start in a congregation, it's never entirely a clean slate. You and I stand on the shoulders of many, many gifted and faithful men and women who have been a part of the lay and clergy leadership of Browns Point for the last 50 years. We follow a long line of predecessors, church fathers and mothers, who laid the road we're standing on for better or for worse. And while today is a fresh start, we don't want to forget them – we carry them with us. We don't want to forget the past, the good or the bad, because it's what has formed us as a people, as a church, and what has brought us to this place together. I am excited to learn this history, to see the faithfulness that has laid the road we're standing on, to hear the stories that have brought us together in this place. Like Moses carrying Joseph's bones, we carry our history into this day and ahead of us into the future.

And, like the Israelites, we don't know where we're going. We may have dreams, we may have visions, we could even have some plans, but our life together is largely unwritten, and much of our journey may indeed be on the 'roundabout way' that Moses and the Israelites walked. I confess to you that I don't have a five-year plan for Browns Point United Methodist Church. I don't have a very detailed agenda coming in here – there are no projects that I think we *must* undertake and no programs that we *must* execute. I don't have in mind that worship should look and feel a certain way or that we should have a certain number of members in a certain amount of time. This may be disappointing for some of you, so I'm just being honest right up front – this may feel like we're on a roundabout way.

But the way I think we are most like Moses and the Israelites, the way hopefully all churches are like them, is that we are being led, all of us – you and me – which means

faithfulness, for us, may look like following a cloud or a fiery pillar right off into the wilderness, but we never have to fear losing our way.

It may seem strange to us reading the Exodus story – following a cloud? Really? They obviously were in a climate VERY different from the Pacific Northwest. And if I saw a pillar of fire in the sky at night, I'd probably not be *following* it. But maybe it seems just as strange to talk about following the voice of God, following a call, following a 30-year-old pastor, or following Jesus.

Steven and I just had our cable hooked up, and I think the cable guy, who was a *very* nice and helpful man, might have hooked us up with more channels than we actually signed up for. We have hundreds and hundreds of channels. When we were surfing through the other night just to see what the options were, we ran across a reality TV show where an atheist spends 30 days living – and worshiping – with evangelicals and the show follows the group to see if the atheist can be converted. It was a *terrible* show, but I found the conversation intriguing when the atheist attended the evangelical's small group Bible study. She kept asking, "So you just follow this stuff even though you have no evidence that it's true." And they kept saying, "Yes, we have faith." The two sides were at an impasse. Neither could understand the other. "It's faith," the Christians were saying. "We believe." "It doesn't make sense," the atheist retorted. "You have no proof."

In a sense, both were right. It doesn't always make sense to follow Jesus, especially when doing so might lead you on the roundabout way through the wilderness. It doesn't make sense to give your life to God, to the church, to discipleship. It doesn't always make sense to the world to try to live a life of love, of justice, and of peace. It didn't make sense for the

Israelites to follow Moses, or for Moses to follow a pillar and a cloud, but they did it, because they *believed*.

I believe, too, and I hope you do, that the words of Exodus are still true for us today: that that cloud and that pillar will never leave their place in front of us. As long as we have eyes to see, God will go before us and lay out the path we are to walk day and night. We will never be alone, even if we are surrounded by wilderness.

Our task, my friends, is not to become the biggest, richest, or most successful church in Tacoma, or in the Pacific Northwest conference. Our task is not to become the biggest, richest, or most successful church in Browns Point. Our task is to **follow the one who leads us to righteousness**. Our task is to wake up every day and to pray, “Where are you leading me, God? Where are you leading us, as a church?” and then pay attention to the answers. We will discern together how God is already moving in our lives and in our community, and instead of making up new programs or following new strategies, we’ll just get on board with what God is already doing here in our midst.

It feels a little scary to me, and it probably did to Moses, to lead the people into the wilderness without much clue as to where they were going. But I have one advantage over Moses: I have evidence in Scripture – again and again – of how God is not only faithful to lead, but how our God always leads to the Promised Land. Our God doesn’t just lead us on the roundabout way to build our character – our God doesn’t just try to teach us a lesson by trudging us through the wilderness. Our God leads to the Promised Land. Our God is leading us – even us – to the kingdom. And this, my friends, is good news.

And so we embark on this journey together: it might be a long one, it might be on a roundabout way, we might sometimes feel like going back to the place we were before. I will make mistakes as your leader, and I will require more grace than you probably realize. But I make this covenant with you: that I will wake up each morning and pray, “God, show me the path and give me the courage to walk it. I want to follow you. Show me how to be faithful.” Will you pray that prayer with me? Each day? “God, show me the path and give me the courage to walk it. I want to follow you. Show me how to be faithful.” You will make mistakes, too, and I covenant with you that I will offer you as much grace as I require – or even more. Together, we will weather this journey in love, trusting not only that one much greater than I is leading us, but also that we are headed for the kingdom. That means the best days are ahead of us, my friends. The best days are ahead.

Thanks be to God. Amen.