

“Dry Ground”

Joshua 3:7-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12

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Sometimes those of us charged with the responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God to the people have a difficult task. When the world’s attention is focused elsewhere, somehow, we have to direct people back towards God. It’s all the more challenging when those of us charged with that responsibility are *ourselves* distracted. We have before us an election so contentious that there are serious concerns about violence erupting. We have a pandemic raging out of control, to the point where ICU units in many hospitals in states like Wisconsin and Idaho and Utah have reached capacity and patients are being sent to other hospitals – in some cases, *hundreds* of miles away. We have baseless conspiracy theories and a stunning number of people saying it’s all a hoax. We have a deadly terrorist attack at a church in France, and a catastrophic earthquake in Turkey and Greece. And we have yet another black man dead at the hands of white police. The news is all a bit ... distracting.

And somehow, in the midst of all this, I’m supposed to have something to say about *God*.

As I look at our lectionary passages for this week, I find myself drawn in several different directions. To begin with, we have the gospel passage in which Jesus calls the Pharisees out for their hypocrisy. Jesus doesn’t mince words here; he rakes them over the coals. They teach the right things, but they don’t follow their own teachings. They care more about how they appear in the eyes of *men* than in the eyes of *God*. They have shortchanged their civic duty with a self-centered desire for prestige and glory and renown. They’ve lost sight of what really *matters*. They’ve gone wildly astray.

What do you do, when people you should be able to trust go wildly astray? What do you do, when they lose sight of what really matters? What do you do, when they shortchange their civic duty with a self-centered desire for prestige and glory and renown? What do you do, when they *fail* you?

Well, what did Jesus do? He called them out. Sternly. Harshly. It is an incredibly strong rebuke. If you keep reading in Matthew 23, you’ll find Jesus’ words getting stronger and stronger. He charges them with one sin after another, and by the end of it, he’s basically consigned them all to the pits of hell.

The message for us? Simple. *Don’t be like that*. Don’t be filled with hypocrisy. If you’re in a position of leadership and responsibility, *remember what your job is*. Remember whom you serve. It’s not *yourself*. You’re not in it for the fame, you’re not in it for the glory, you’re not in it for the money. You’re in it for the *people*. You’re in it *for the public good*. You’re in it ... to do *God’s* will. Not your own.

That leads us nicely into the passage from 1 Thessalonians. Paul was an incredibly strong leader for those early Christians in Thessalonika, so strong that sometimes people accuse him of being filled with arrogance and pride. “You remember our toil ... we worked night and day....” He says his conduct

was “pure, upright, and blameless.” Some people, uttering words like that, would be boasting. Paul is not boasting. God had given him a sacred responsibility, and he performed it well. No, not just well – he performed it *admirably*. He was on a mission to bring the gospel to the Gentile world, and he was *incredibly* successful, despite tremendous hardships. I’m not sure Christianity would have had much of a chance if it hadn’t been for Paul. *But he wasn’t in it for himself*. His goal was never fame, or glory, or prestige, and *certainly* not money. He spent the last several years of his life in chains, and was ultimately executed for his Christian convictions. He was doing this for *God*. He was doing it because he was utterly convinced of the *truth* of God’s Word, a Word that he fervently wanted to implant in people’s hearts. “We also constantly give thanks to God for this,” he says, “that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.” Paul’s mission was successful *anytime* that Word of God took root in a human heart. Paul’s mission was successful anytime the kingdom of God gained a new member. Paul’s mission was successful anytime a new believer started letting *God* work in *them*.

Why did that matter? Why was Paul trying to bring new believers to Jesus? Well, look around at the world he lived in. He saw a *tremendous* amount of idolatry. A *tremendous* amount of immorality. A *tremendous* amount of injustice, and selfishness, and greed, and lies, and all sorts of other evils. He knew there was only one real antidote to all that: a Savior, a Lord, called Jesus Christ.

Is there idolatry in our world? Is there immorality? Is there injustice, and selfishness, and greed, and lies, and all sorts of other evils that don’t belong here? *You bet there is*. If any of us had any naïve notions that this world was doing “just fine,” I think 2020 has probably shattered them. I don’t know how the rest of you have been doing, but I have been heartsick and distraught – for months now – as a result of all the exaggerations, lies, injustice, corruption, selfishness, and greed that have been *so much on display* this year. I look around at our society, and I do *not* see the gospel values of Jesus Christ in any measure of abundance. Frankly, I see evil having a field day. That has led me to feel a renewed and urgent need to *get the gospel of Jesus Christ* out there to the world. It is not enough to just be preaching to *you* folks. It is not enough to wait for people to come through our doors. We’ve got – we have *got* – to get Jesus’ teachings out into our larger society. That’s going to take some effort; that’s going to require some risk; but we cannot just sit back in our chairs at home and let *evil* wreck this kind of *havoc* on the world. We need to be doing *more* to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world.

Look around. Seriously, look around. Is this the way the world is supposed to be? Is there *evil* out there? Do you have *good news* to share? What can *you* do to share and spread the gospel message of Jesus Christ? What can *you* do that might encourage *somebody, somewhere* to follow *him*?

That’s my second line of thought as I look at these lectionary passages appointed for today. But there is also a third, one that grows out of that Old Testament reading from the book of Joshua, that tells the story of how the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, *on dry ground*.

Imagine the scene. The Israelites have arrived at the Jordan River. The Promised Land lies on the other side. Thousands upon thousands of men, women, and children are eager to settle the land that will be their new home. They just have to get across the river. The Jordan River is not very wide and it’s not very deep, except they have come upon it during the rainy season, when the waters are flooding their banks. Under normal circumstances the Israelites could have waded or swum across it, but under these circumstances that would be risky and dangerous. They need another way.

God gives them another way.

The priests are leading the masses, carrying the Ark of the Covenant. When their feet touch the water, something happens upstream; the waters gather; they stand still; they “rise up in a heap.” The water flowing downstream, towards the Israelites, comes to a halt; the riverbed dries up. The priests, bearing the Ark, take their places in the middle of the riverbed, and all the Israelites make their way across. *God* has cleared them a path. *God* has made it possible for them to cross in safety.

Imagine what that might have *felt* like. To behold, firsthand, a miracle of the Lord, the almighty power of God on display for all to see, for all to *feel*. You stand there, in the middle of the riverbed, looking upstream, knowing that the only thing holding the water back is the mighty power of God, and the only reason that God is holding the water back is because God wants *you* and all your kin to make your way across, into your new homeland. It is a majestic moment. You stand in awe.

There come those times in our lives when we reach a sacred milestone. Those moments when we stand in *awe* at the majesty and wonder of God, who brought us safely through a difficult or demanding period in our lives. Think of a graduation, or a wedding, or the precious moments just after giving birth. Think of a new job, or a major birthday, or a retirement celebration. There are these watershed moments in our lives, when we pause, taking stock of all that God has done, rejoicing and giving thanks, maybe looking backwards at the road we have traveled, maybe looking forward to the bright future that yet awaits. It is a peaceful moment, a joyous moment, a sacred moment.

For the Israelites, it took them *forty years* to get to that moment. Forty years of wilderness wanderings, forty years of despair and hardship, forty years of complaining and murmuring, forty years of wondering, “Is this desolation *ever* going to end?” For us, and this pandemic, it’s been nine months. We are weary; we wish it would just *go away*; we desperately want our “normal” lives back. All the indicators suggest we’ve got a ways to go yet. This could be a long, hard, difficult winter.

Which makes it all the more important that we *look* for some signs of God’s presence, God’s guiding hand. If you don’t have a strong prayer life, well, now is an *excellent* time to develop one. We’re going to *need* it, to get through this. When the Israelites were hauled off into exile in Babylon, far from their homeland, and with their temple in ruins, *that’s* when they really learned how to pray. Maybe, for some of you, *this pandemic season* will be the time when *you* really learn how to pray.

It’s also important that we hold on to hope. Every pandemic that has ever struck our world *has*, sooner or later, come to an end. There *will* be a day when we will reach that sacred milestone, that moment when we can truly look back and say, “Thank God – *it’s over*.” It’s not going to be this week; it’s not going to be this month; it’s highly unlikely it will be this year. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we may have a ways to go on this long and difficult journey. But, eventually, there will be a day when the vaccine will come, when it will be tested and proven, when it will be widely available, for all of us.

And when that happens – when we reach that joyful day of deliverance – when we cross that major threshold – we can all breathe a collective sigh of relief. We can take our place in the middle of the Jordan River, standing on dry ground, looking upstream at the mighty power of God holding back the raging flood, and we can say, with a tremendous amount of gratitude and thanksgiving, “Thank God – *it’s over*. We’ve crossed ... to the other side.” And what *hallelujahs* we will sing, when that day comes!

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