

Sermon Text For March 17, 2019

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Jeremiah 33:1-11, Acts 8:4-25

“I didn’t quite get it”

The shooting deaths at the mosque are a direct result of white people like us unable to deal with the change that is happening in our world where cultures and societies are forced to live with each other and we are forced to recognize that because of the color of our skin, or because of the God that we worship, it does not make any of us better than any others. Those who have been in power for the past hundreds of years are not willing to accept this. As Christians we are not willing to accept that our religion should be considered as important in civil society equal to others. I’m comfortable with that. As whites who are used to be in power we are not comfortable thinking that people of other races should have the same opportunities that we have and that people are made at creation from the same mud. We don’t like the changes that are happening around us, they are very threatening to us.

We are such creatures of habit. We like what we know. Any type of change automatically elicits a powerful nostalgia for the way things were even if we were worse off back then, at least it was familiar. The ABA stated that over 76% of their clients who are dissatisfied with their lawyers will still stick with them because at least I know what I’m facing, as opposed to changing to someone who could very well be better.

We are the same, and we find in today’s Scripture the Israelites who didn’t get the direction God is leading them because the journey to change is scary and also the apostles who face opposition and challenge because the status quo, the way things had always been, especially with God, was changing. We are people called to get it and to be agents of God’s power so that more and more people can come to Christ. We are not called to maintain any type of comfort, but rather to constantly seek avenues by which God’s power can move. Sometimes that means getting that a change needs to be had. Let’s see how this is done in Scripture today.

READ SCRIPTURE

One of my favorite lines out of C.S. Lewis’ Narnia series comes from the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe there is wonderful exchange between Lucy and Mr. and Mrs. Beaver who are running from the witch and they hear that Aslan, the might lion, the king of all things might be coming back to Narnia. Lucy had never heard of him and is trying to understand him and he asks the question to Mr. Beaver: ““Then he isn’t safe?”

said Lucy. 'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver. 'Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'

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Now in relation to God that may be a bit hard to grasp because I think many of us, especially in this unsafe time would trade, against our better judgment, good in order to be safe. It is hard to trade familiarity where you know what to expect, even if it is bad, for a situation where the future is uncertain and every day brings a change and the unknown. The situations that we find in Scripture today are marked by people who would much rather stay with the bad, that which is not of God, in order to fall back into what they perceive as being safe, but restrictive. But if God is good, and if all things work for the good for those who trust in the Lord, then whatever change takes place which is in God's desire is going to produce God's desired results, which is good.

The Israelites are a lot like we are. They are leaving Egypt, Pharoah has changed his mind and has unleashed the fury of his military might which is now breathing down their necks. The Israelites are terrified, they cry out to God then they lay into Moses, listen to what they say in vs. 11: What's the matter Moses, not enough graves to bury all of us in Egypt so you brought us out here in the wilderness to die? It would have been better to live as slaves in Egypt than to die in freedom in the wilderness. Very different from Give me liberty or give me death. You see, we have always publicly professed that there is nothing more important to us than freedom and yet so many of us in our own lives continue to live in bondage. So many of us are willing to trade our freedom for our safety

So many of us would rather maintain our bad, destructive, or at the least not helpful habits and deal with their repercussions because we've been doing it our entire life. Instead of taking the risk of truly trusting and relying upon God to free us from whatever bondage we may find ourselves by turning it over to God.

Moses tells the people: God has been on your side, is on your side and will be on your side. Don't fight it, for God will fight for you. Vs. 14, all you have to do is to keep still. How do you keep still when the Egyptians are breathing down your neck in horse and chariot? How do you keep still and trust when the storm is raging around you: you are going through a divorce and your children are at stake and you don't know how you're going to make ends meet. I don't get it, I want things the way they used to be, at least I knew how to act and react then. How do you keep still when cancer seems to be stalking you and reappears when you think you had it beat? How do you keep still and

let God do the fighting when your kids are dealing with issues in life that you never dreamed they would have to face?

It is hard to do, but we must do it, and once you do, there is a moment of aha, or realization, of freedom that can only come when God parts the red sea and puts you on dry ground, that ground is coming. God may not be safe, but he is good.

In Acts, Philip finds himself as the messenger to people who didn't quite get it, but all of a sudden are getting it and faster than anyone would ever expect. Let's look at Acts 8. Where is Philip? In Samaria. What do you know about Samaria? It is almost a polar opposite from Judah even though they are right next to each other geographically. If you wanted to insult someone you would call them a Samaritan. Samaritans were considered the outcasts, the undesireables, those not welcomed which should shed some light on the parable of the good Samaritan. They were as far from each other as North Korea is from South Korea, as the United States is from Iran. But Philip is getting the job done. He was bringing people to Christ left and right. In fact, he was so successful that the Apostles in Jerusalem, the big guns, were sent in to verify that these dregs of Samaria were actually being saved.

So John and Peter go, but did you know that they weren't exactly neutral parties. In Luke 9:54 when Jesus and his disciples are not welcome in Samaria and run into trouble a disciple suggests helpfully: "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them." John said this, but there they go.

They get there and find something odd, that I don't quite get and find hard to understand. In vs. 16 it states that they were baptized in the name of Jesus but had not yet received the Holy Spirit. So Peter and John lay hands on them and they receive the Holy Spirit. We can't stop there, because what just happened. This is probably the hardest verses in all of Acts, and quite honestly, I just don't get them, I don't understand them.

Why wasn't being baptized in the name of Christ enough? Peter at Pentecost tells the thousands of people gathered there: repent, be baptized in the name of Christ, and you will receive the Holy Spirit. What happened? Why was the Holy Spirit a no-show? God does something uniquely powerful here. After centuries of division, Peter and John were used to draw the Samaritans fully into the church. But this is not normative for all Christians. When someone receives Christ, the Holy Spirit comes immediately. That's how one becomes a Christian. We look to Romans 8:9 which states: if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

You know that churches can be filled with people who have been baptized, love Jesus, never miss church, but have never experienced the fullness of what it means to live in the Spirit of Jesus. Is there anything miraculous, power filled, risky or edgy in your Christian life that is able to help you say: I get it, that's what it's all about. Are you someone who would much rather be in comfort and out of the will of God, than be satisfied with what you have and in God's will?

Simon didn't get it. He wanted to buy the power of the Holy Spirit, after all he thought Peter and John owned that power. They never owned it, we never do, it is a gift from God. Peter's response to Simon in the literal Greek is toned down in our Scripture, literally it says take your money and go... What are we used to in our culture, what do we fall back on time and time again? We think we can buy our way out of things, or we can keep doing the same thing and get a different result.

My mom grew up in the Congo and there was a lot of tribal magic that the people used and often the Christian missionaries would find themselves in direct competition with them. One time a young man who was a schoolmate of my mother's was walking down a path and without knowing it he walked over a charm that had a no-trespassing spell cast upon it. He came back to the dorm and died that evening. It was powerful magic.

But there was another man named Ngiali who volunteered to go to a pigmy tribe and be their preacher pastor. Nobody wanted to go to the pigmies, they were considered a lot like the Samaritans, unloveable, low class, crude. This African missionary wanted to go, but they had to go down the river to get there and this African was not a river tribe man and so did not know how to swim. But he did know, that when the crocodiles called you, you had to respond and allow them to take you and they would keep you in their lair for 7 days and then they would decide to let you live or die.

As they were going across the boat tipped in a storm and under he went. Now he should have allowed himself to be taken under by the water, the crocodiles were calling, but he said, my God in Jesus Christ is stronger than any other human made god or story that people have made up. He pushed up from the bottom took a breath and went down again, he pushed up again, the third time he went down a box from the boat had settled on the bottom and he was able to stand and keep his head above water.

From that event he went to the pigmy tribe having broken the spell of the crocodile and able to bring the entire tribe to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Within no time they had a bonfire with all of their talismans and charms. As the fire was being

lit the medicine man came, the same one who was responsible for the charm that had killed my mother's friend, and he placed all of his material in the fire and accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They were all baptized and they all received the Holy Spirit, because God used one man who was not willing to let mere traditions define who he was.

These things do happen. Some of us don't get it because, well there is too much to risk if we let ourselves be free in Christ. We don't know what it might mean if we rely completely upon Christ, I would much rather face my battles and use the weapons that I am now, even if I am miserable. You have everything to lose if you turn your back on a change in your life toward God. Be still and allow God to take over your life. Let God do your fighting, just be still in the storm, know that God will prevail, and you'll get it. Amen.