

Finding God in Life

Exodus 14:5-31

Rev. Allen Mothershed - September 29th, 2019 - St. Matthew UCC

When I was a young child it was common to hear people in the Bible Belt talk about sharing your witness. It was a common expectation of Christians that we be ready at any moment to tell other how we had gotten saved by Jesus.

One year, I had a friend of mine drag me to his church's revival so he could get enough gold stars to receive a new fancy bible. The evangelist, with real tears in his eyes, described how he had spent a lifetime breaking the heart of Jesus and everyone who ever cared for him. He had stolen, cheated, and beaten up people. He was a drunken man who lost every job he had and alienated any woman who dared to take a chance on him until he found himself serving time in Parchman, the Mississippi state penitentiary. It was there, through a chaplain, that he found Jesus and knew God's love and amazing forgiveness. He shared with us how his life was different now, and the newfound happiness he had since accepting Jesus. The man seemed genuine and his life, by all appearances, was indeed transformed. Now he was making a difference in his life.

The only problem I had with what I heard was that it left me with a great anxiety. I knew that there wasn't a snowballs chance in hell that I related to anything remotely close to what he had to say. I had never robbed anyone and never beaten anyone else up, unless you count my brother. I never did anything so wrong as to be sent to prison, if you are not counting the time-outs my parents gave me in my room. I was too young to drink and the only drugs I took were the ones my doctor gave me. What could I say about my faith?

I do not think the way I used to think about all of this. I am still evangelical enough to believe that it is important to share my faith with others. But my understanding of what it means to give a witness to my faith has changed. It does not have to exactly follow the formula of "I once was lost but now I am found." Nor is salvation restricted to once in a lifetime conversions. My life, and every life, is filled with moments of grace that have the power to change us. I would not be who I am if not for the grace of God.

Since those times, I have written numerous spiritual autobiographies: in my application to get into seminary; in my paper to graduate from seminary; in my paper to be ordained as a United Methodist Minister and then a United Church of Christ pastor. One of the gifts of writing sermons almost weekly is that it causes me to reflect, quite intentionally each week, on my faith and how God is present in my life. The truth is that I am not always awake to those moments of grace. Rather, I have often discovered that it is only in looking back on my life that I can see when God has touched my life.

This is the way it has always been for the people of God. In fact, holy scriptures are the written testimonies of the people of faith from Israel to the early church. This book is the collective experience of God by the people of God. What we find in its pages

are both individual testimonies of faith and communal testimonies of faith. We see individual lives changed, but also change by entire communities, nations, and even human history.

We have one of the most essential witnesses of the people of God in this morning's reading of the parting of the Red Sea. Like a treasured keepsake, this story has been retold from one generation to another until someone wrote it down. The story tells us how God typically behaves in our world. God is a God above all other gods, who is on the side of those who are oppressed. God is a God who hears the suffering, knows the pain, and comes down to rescue those who are oppressed.

In our story this morning, we see how God acts to save the people of God. How this happens is not entirely clear. At one point, God tells the people of God to stay put and to watch how God is going to take care of the approaching Egyptian army. At another point, they are told to march ahead. God parts the water so they can escape and then drowns the army of oppressors.

It must have been a mob scene. This is not a disciplined group of people - certainly not an army of followers ready to handle an approaching disciplined and experienced army led by Pharaoh. They are a motley group of slaves. Many have never been in the desert before. They have followed Moses to the marsh area near the Red Sea. But now they can see the dust clouds stirred up by the approaching army of Pharaoh coming after them. There is terrible panic as the people have no idea what to do. Moses yells orders and tells the people to continue to trust him, as some accuse him of leading them out into the wilderness to their deaths.

Remarkably, the Egyptian army does not charge into the camp of Israelites. It is dark now and something made them stop. Then, there is a confusing night. More orders from Moses, a violent wind blowing, thunder and lightning, crying children, terror, mud and water, stumbling and pushing, movement forward. The wonder of a path through what they thought was water. Daylight comes and behind them they can see the bodies of the Egyptian army washed up on the shore.

Then a celebration! A joyful celebration! They cannot believe that somehow they have come through what they believed would be impossible to survive. They are filled with wonder and awe. All they can say is that it is a miracle. The sister of Moses sings a song, a joyous song about the salvation of God. They made it through and God was faithful.

This is how our lives go, is it not? God has a way of working through the uncertainty and the confusion of our lives as we experience them. Mysteriously, God brings deliverance when we did not know where it was going to come from. You might not be able to exactly say how things happened in the midst of struggle. Perhaps only later do you understand.

I invite you to think now about your own lives: a time you did not think you'd make it, but you did. There is rhythm to our lives. It goes something like this: There is the status quo (our equilibrium), until something upsets the status quo. Then there is confusion, fear, anger, grief, and doubt. But then comes resolve, followed by a new status quo. What I am describing is one of the constants of being a human being: change. We are always changing. We enjoy for a time the way things are going. But nothing stays the same. We can never hold on to the way things are.

Another way to describe this flow is enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment. Or if you like, order, disorder, a new order. Or still another way, the calm before the storm, the storm, the calm after the storm. We fear the disorder so much; we avoid the disenchantments of life; we dread changes - at least those changes we do not instigate. We do not want to be out of control of our lives. And yet, those changes often make us who we are.

Here is the good news: God is present in all points of our lives.

- God is there when we answer a friend, "Life couldn't be better." Perhaps things are not so perfect, but we have learn to live with it and make the best of it.
- God is there when the disturbance happens. Maybe God is in that disturbance - the one shaking things up. God has a way of challenging our status quo because God is not finished with us yet. God is not finished with our world. God will challenge the injustice of this world. God will challenge our complacency; the way we settle for less in this world and in our lives. We may protest; we say "Just let me be." We prefer known misery to the unknown.
- Then God is with us in the change. We are no longer the same. We thank God for the new normal. That change comes from this interplay of God's grace acting in our lives and our cooperation with that grace.

If I were to ask you, "How is God speaking to you in your life now?" You might honestly say, "I don't know." If the testimony of the scripture is correct, the silence of God is a common experience of even the most faithful. Abraham and Sarah are prime examples of that. They often went quite awhile without clear direction from God. But if I ask you, "Where are you experiencing grace in your life?" I suspect everyone of you has an answer. Grace is in the surprising, unexpected, unmerited acts of love that happen all the time in our lives and in our world. The fingerprints of God's grace are all over our lives and in the events of our common life.

There are some people in this world who believe that God is in charge of everything that happens in this life. Everything has been predetermined and people have the date of their deaths planned. One of the great reformers after Martin Luther, who believed in predestination once said, **"There is not a mosquito that bites that has not been ordained to do that."** I have never thought that true. Rather, I see God as infusing the world and its people with grace and love. In the mix with all the evil, the injustice and the hatred in this world, there is love and grace and beauty to be found. We can get lost in all the evil and pain and injustice or we can be one of those people

who walk each day open and ready to receive and offer grace. But we have to learn to look for it.

It is like an older child who lived in France during the dark days of World War II. His world was covered in the darkness and the destructive powers of war that made just getting by difficult. One day, when he was playing outside, he found a tiny piece of glass from a broken Nazi motorcycle abandoned on the side of the road. He discovered something amazing. He could use that broken piece of glass to shine light in the dark places, even the darkest of places could be lit up with light. He took that tiny piece of glass and filed it into a round mirror he could keep in his pocket. It became a reminder of the presence of grace and light that always shines for those who look for it.

So there you have it. You all have a story to tell. You all have a testimony to give. Keep the eyes of your heart open. There is light and grace everywhere to be found and shared. Amen