

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, NC
September 14, 2014
Rev. Pen Peery

Taking the Step
Exodus 14:5-15

A few weeks ago I preached a sermon about Moses hearing God's call from the burning bush. God told Moses to return to the land of Egypt, where Moses' people were serving as slaves to Pharaoh, and to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go free.

Our scripture for today picks up after Moses has followed God's directions. As you know, it took a little convincing for Pharaoh to comply with Moses' demand. There were plagues – 10 in all. Flies, gnats, frogs, boils, locusts, and finally the Passover – where God struck down the first-born of every house and field in Egypt, save for the Israelite children. After that, Pharaoh decided he had had enough – and he let Moses lead the Israelites out of Egypt so that they could enter into the land that God had promised them.

I am reading from the 14th chapter of Exodus, beginning at verse 5. Listen for the word of God.

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When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed towards the people, and they said, 'What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?' So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, "Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians"? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.' But Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.'

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Let's be clear about what is going on in this passage.

Moses answers God's impossible sounding call from a burning bush with a "yes."
He finds the courage to stand up to Pharaoh and make his demands.
He stays the course through 10 plagues.
He rallies the Israelite people to follow him out of Egypt.

And then, with the taste of victory still sweet on his tongue, Pharaoh has a change of heart and decides to send – not just a militia – but the entire Egyptian army...every chariot, every horse, every officer...after this rag-tag group of Israelites who are trudging toward the Promised Land.

As he tries to flee the Egyptian army, Moses marches his people onto a peninsula. The word *Pi-hahiroth* means "mouth of the waters." On three sides of the Israelites is the Red Sea. On their fourth side is the Egyptian army with Pharaoh perched on his chariot.

Faced with this scenario Moses' people do what people always do – they complain.
"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?"

But you can understand the complaint, right?

When the future that lies ahead seems unclear, at best, it is natural for people to long for what is familiar...even if what is familiar isn't all that great.

"What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

Poor Moses.

At least he can count on God to be helpful and supportive.
Except when God is the one who hardens Pharaoh's heart (you noticed that, I hope...the scripture says that Pharaoh didn't really change his own mind and start chasing the Israelites. The scripture says that God changed Pharaoh's mind so that he would start chasing after the Israelites).

At least Moses can count on God to be helpful and supportive.
Except when Moses is standing with his back to the strongest army on the face of the earth and his front to the shores of the Red Sea; when God says to Moses, "why are you calling out to me? Just tell the people to walk forward."

Thanks.

Of course, we have the benefit of knowing what happens next.

We know that the Israelites do walk forward –

We know that the Red Sea parts so that the Israelites can cross safely to the other side.

We know that God’s plan all along – the reason for God’s curious behavior in hardening Pharaoh’s heart – was to get Pharaoh and his army in a place where there would be no denying the fact that the Lord – and not the Pharaoh – was a sovereign power not to be trifled with.

But what I want you to imagine is what it would have been like to be standing on that peninsula if you didn’t know the future.

“Just tell the people to go forward.”

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I think Ruby Bridges and her parents know what that must have felt like.

Ruby Bridges turned 60 years old this week.

Most of you know her story – but if you don’t...

In 1960, when Ruby was a six year old with pigtails, she became the first person of color to integrate the New Orleans public schools.

She was the only black student assigned to William Frantz Elementary School. On Ruby’s first day, the school erupted in protest. There were threats. White parents pulled their children out of school. Ruby spent that first day in the principal’s office because the administration thought it was the safest place for her to be.

The second of day school was different. Ruby actually went to class. The only teacher who would teach Ruby was a woman named Barbara Henry. So for more than year, that is what Mrs. Henry did. She taught a classroom that was empty except for one desk – where Ruby Bridges sat.

Because of the threats against her life and the protests that raged across the city, Ruby spent her first few months being escorted by Federal Marshalls from her mother’s car to the front door of the school. Every day, she would walk past throngs of people who would scream and taunt and gesture.

One morning in class, Mrs. Henry told Ruby that she had noticed that Ruby’s lips were moving while she made that terrifying walk. “What were you saying to those people?” Mrs. Henry asked. “I wasn’t talking to them,” Ruby answered, “I was

praying for them.” Usually, Ruby said, she prayed on her car ride to school but that morning she had forgotten, so she prayed on her walk. “Please be with me, God,” she would pray, “and be with these people, too. Forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.”¹

The Lord said: “Just tell the people to go forward...”

It’s a hard thing when you can’t see the future.

But that is what the people of God have been doing since the beginning.

Moving forward into a future that they cannot see – only one that they can trust.

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Some of you know that Lindsey and I had the opportunity to go to Scotland last month. We were there for a conference – it was a conversation, really, in which 12 Presbyterian pastors with Charlotte connections met up with 12 Church of Scotland pastors in a town a little north of Edinburgh.

The conference was the second iteration of an event that First Presbyterian helped to host in 2006. That year, 144 Scottish Presbyterians came to Charlotte for a week of worship, workshops, and relationship building. Many of you may have hosted a Scot or two in your homes.

The focus of our time together this year was less about our common heritage and more about a shared challenge – namely, how is the church called to respond in grace and truth to a culture that says that they are “spiritual but not religious.”

If you have been to Scotland, and you have been to church, you know that our sisters and brothers there face a stark reality. By numerous estimates, only about 3-5% of Scots attend a worship service...of any kind...during the week.

I had a chance to preach while we were there – at St. Columba’s Church in Glenrothes...again, a little north of Edinburgh. St. Columba’s is a delightful parish with an energetic pastor named Alan Kimmett. The church is faithfully teaching and preaching the word, they are reaching out to the community, they are nurturing one another – and the church is dying.

My sense, when I looked out at the faithful remnant of St. Columba’s Church that Sunday morning is that they are a people who don’t quite know what happened – or what changed.

And, to be honest, that experience of preaching at a church in Scotland gave me a sense of urgency. Not panic – but urgency. I couldn’t wait to come home to you – my congregation – and tell you that what we have in front of us...as a still healthy,

¹ As found on Ruby Bridges’ website: <http://www.rubybridges.com/story.htm>

growing, vibrant, congregation, in the center of a growing and thriving city...is such an opportunity to share the truth about Jesus Christ and the joy of authentic Christian community and the power and possibility of a group of believers committed to Christ's mission and justice with a people who are hungry for it!

But how we do that is going to require for us to walk forward – to trust our steps into a future that we cannot yet see – because the people who are going to be a part of our church, those whom God will gather into this community – are going to be different. They are going to look differently. They are going to dress differently. They may not come with much language of faith. Their questions may not be our questions. But they are curious. And they do want to be in a relationship with God. And – as our preacher Rodger said last week – they want to give their lives over for a purpose; for something that matters. And that makes being a church in the middle of a city a pretty exciting place to be.

During the conference our conversation was led by two scholars – an American named Diana Butler Bass and a Scot named Doug Gay. Diana is a Sociologist of Religion and Doug is a theology professor at the University of Glasgow. I learned a lot from Diana and Doug – more than I can summarize in a sermon – but there are two points that they made that are worth sharing this morning.

Diana – who is a student of history – believes that what is happening to the religious landscape in our country has all the signs of what we have – in the past – called “A Great Awakening.” And when you look at previous Great Awakenings you notice that there comes a point when the people of God have to make a choice – to walk into the new thing that God is doing, or to escape to the familiar ways of being. It's a choice – not one that takes place in a moment, but over a generation or two of decisions. Diana thinks the church in America is in this moment.

The other point I want to share with you about my time in Scotland where I got to think and pray about the church is from Doug Gay. Doug challenged our group to consider what it was that we say we believe about God's promises.

And what we say is that God is faithful and that God has established the Church of Jesus Christ to be his instrument in the world.

So when it feels like the people of God who are the Church are facing a sea of change – perhaps we should do what we have always done: step forward, knowing that we are not alone.

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Amen.