

## Packing for an Emergency

Exodus 12:30-36; Matthew 10:5-16

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 20) 2023

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*An emergency is an exodus into the unknown, and our task is to make a home there for ourselves.*

-Rebecca Solnit

*The church is a people on the move, like Jesus' first disciples breathlessly trying to keep up with Jesus. It is an adventure with many unknowns...*

-Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *Resident Aliens*

Journalist and activist Rebecca Solnit lives in earthquake country in the San Francisco area. In her new book, *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, she says all residents there are urged to prepare a kit or bag packed with emergency essentials so when “the big one” comes along they can immediately evacuate or shelter in place. Other people live in wildfire country are urged to prepare a similar emergency bag to grab when you must flee on short notice. The same thing is true for people living in hurricane prone areas or in tornado alley of the Texas plains up through Oklahoma and Kansas. Sometimes called a “bug-out” bag or “go-to” bag, it usually includes a flashlight, batteries, first-aid kits, water, documents, and important keepsakes, and so on.

Our own City of Nacogdoches website has an Emergency Management page with a link to a Basic Emergency Supply Kit that explains and lists what we need in an emergency.

Solnit takes this idea a step further and suggests that we also need to think of packing for emergencies to include the stories and values “we carry that will strengthen or weaken us, connect us or disconnect us, motivate or demoralize us...that is, they make us who we are, and who we are has everything to do with who and what survives.” Solnit then asks, “What will you take with you in an emergency?” (p. 185).

That’s part of what I want to ask us this morning, “What will you take with you in an emergency?” And I want to ask this as a kind of response to our celebration of Jane and my 34 years with you last week and, while we’re on the subject, Steve and Kay’s 34 years with us today. This morning, taking a week off from the lectionary, I want to look forward and talk about where we’re going on our journey into a future that is scary and unknown. We are packing for an emergency.

But listen to this carefully. Rebecca Solnit points out that the word “emergency” comes from the word “emerge” meaning to exit, to leave behind and “emergency” originally had to do with unexpectedly exiting from what is stable and familiar. An emergency “is an exodus into the unknown,” she says (p. 4).

But to face the unknown also includes hope. The unknown, by its very definition, means that we do not know. Solnit says, “Hope means recognizing the uncertainty of the future and making a commitment to try to participate in shaping it. It means facing difficulties and accepting uncertainty... and to know that we must act without knowing the outcome of those actions.”

Finally, Solnit says – and I want you to hear this – “Over and over again, the world has been changed by people who, at the outset, seemed far too puny to pit

themselves against the most powerful institutions of their day” (p. 5-6). Austin Heights, do you hear this?!

If an emergency is “an exodus into the unknown” then let’s go to the book of Exodus and see what God might have to say to us this morning.

We pick up the exodus story just as the final plague has descended upon the Egyptian empire (ch.12). Known as the first Passover, because of the Lord passing through the households of Egypt, striking down every firstborn, yet passing over households who have put lamb’s blood over their doorposts. As a result, in terror and shock the Egyptian Empire told the Israelite slaves to get out of Egypt as fast as they could. “Be gone! And we hope to never see you again! Get out! Now!”

So, the Israelites grabbed what they could – God had prepared them by commanding them to prepare and eat unleavened bread, so that when it was time to leave, they could leave without waiting for the bread to rise. “Pack light and grab your emergency bag and go!”

Just before leaving the Israelites said to the Egyptians, we’ve been your slaves for 400 years, and we’d like some reparations. The Egyptians screamed, “Take whatever you want! Just go!” So, the Israelites did. They grabbed the silverware, the gold necklaces, and anything else of value they could carry.

“Man oh man, we are finally free! Amen and Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!” But as they got outside of the city walls, out in the desert, after a few days the adrenaline began to wear off, they looked ahead with squinted eyes in the desert sun, and as far as they could see was nothing. Nothing but sand and sun and hot. “Say what you want about the tenets of Egyptian imperialism but at least it was an ethos. It was slavery but it was reliable – three meals a day. They weren’t

great meals, but they were dependable. We had shelter and we had steady work. Now, we don't know what we're looking at or where we're going and what's going to happen." In other words, it was an exodus into the unknown.

What will you take with you in an emergency?

I've mentioned before that when I was in high school, I traveled on a summer school trip to Europe. Our high school joined with one in Abilene, and we worked all year raising money so everyone who wanted could go. My parents went as sponsors along with several other adults, including some of my teachers. When it came time to pack, I had it down pat. I had read the literature, made lists, and paired down the list to where I was able to travel light. I think my bag was less than half of the weight limit. But then came my mom's luggage. If mine was half the weight limit, hers was half again over the weight limit. She carried everything but the kitchen sink and it felt as if she carried that. And I knew that not only would she have to pay extra fees, but that I would be the one hauling that big old bag all over Europe. There was a lot of stuff she needed to leave behind, but I couldn't tell her. She was going to have to learn as she went. And sure enough, almost every day of the trip, she would say, "I don't know why I brought that. It's just taking up room and adding weight." And some days, depending on what it was, she simply left it behind in the room when we left.

My guess is that you could have tracked the Israelites across the desert by following the cast-off baggage and junk they figured out they didn't need.

When we pack for an emergency, we need to know there are many things we need to leave behind.

Writer, activist, and organizer Bill McKibben says that often people will come up to him and ask, “What’s the most important thing I can do for the climate?” Bill responds, “Stop being an individual; join something... Be in community.” In other words, one of the things we need to learn to leave behind is individualism. Where we’re going will take being together and working together and showing up for one another. Community.

I’ve been reading climate change science, activism, and theology for almost forty years, and across the board, time and time again, the first thing they all say is, “Be in community.” Community, community, community.

“We” is the crucial word. Sometimes it seems that traveling light would mean travel as an individual. But it doesn’t. We end up getting stranded on our own. We get lost, etc. Instead, it is all about connections – connecting with one another, connecting to God’s creation, connecting to our place, and even connecting to the hardships we find ourselves in and figuring out together how to change the hardships or improvising.

If we’re going to make it across the desert, enter the unknown, we must go together. Lone individuals won’t make it.

According to Matthew, right off Jesus calls ordinary people, in this case, fishermen, to drop their nets and come and follow him. Leave behind everything that entangles us or is an obstacle to following Jesus, and then join with others on the adventure of discipleship. The disciples have no idea where they are going, and no idea of what Jesus will do. All they know is that Jesus is calling them together, and together they will improvise and learn to act like Jesus (see Matt. 4:18-22).

For the next three years Jesus teaches the disciples to live together. In Matthew 5-6-7 he teaches the Sermon on the Mount, a radical reassessment of what to pack for an unknown future and what to leave behind: How to leave behind control and competition and how to pack forgiveness – forgiving one another and learning to receive forgiveness. How to trust and lean on one another, how to pray, how to serve, how to love, and so on.

Russell Moore is a Southern Baptist and the new editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*. Moore was quoted a couple of weeks ago saying that he had multiple pastors tell him, essentially, the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount in their preaching — “turn the other cheek,” for example — and have someone come up after to say, “Where did you get those liberal talking points?” Moore said what was alarming is that the pastor would say, “I’m literally quoting Jesus Christ,” the response would not be, “I apologize.” The response would be, “Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That’s weak.”

Folks when we’re packing for an emergency, Jesus Christ is not who we leave behind. In baptism we commit our lives to follow Jesus Christ and learn to live together in what the Apostle Paul calls the body of Christ. Together we learn to embody and practice, practice, practice the Way of Jesus, most especially the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew tells us, in our reading today, that after a lot of teaching and following, Jesus sends the disciples out on a kind of practice run of sharing the good news with the surrounding villages. “Don’t worry about the Gentiles and Samaritans, let’s just concentrate on the nearby Jews,” Jesus says. “Concentrate on telling and showing people that the new Way of the kingdom of God is breaking into our world. And I want you to travel light. Give up and leave behind your old

stuff – your power and control, leave behind your defensiveness, and rely instead on the power of the living God. All your false baggage like power and exploitation and control is what got you into trouble in the first place. Leave behind competition and learn to pack cooperation instead. Build connections wherever you go.”

Of course, by the end of Matthew’s story, Jesus has trained the disciples to go to all nations and peoples. In the book of Acts, the disciples start off with fellow Jews, but Jews from around the world who speak different languages. Before long they’re reaching out to and including Samaritans and eventually Gentiles and eunuchs and all kinds of people previously thought to be unclean. Led by the same Spirit of the Living God, is why to this day we embrace all sorts of people and build connections. It’s why we travel with LGBTQ Christians and others. It’s why we keep working on becoming anti-racists. We need each other and we know we cannot make it on our own.

It’s why being multi-generational is so important. Essential to packing for an emergency is that we pack with 80-year-olds and 8-year-olds together. Our young people need to hear the stories of who we are and where we come from as they help lead us into the future. And part of that is our openness to being surprised by our children.

One of the great stories from our recent Border Mission trip to Brownsville is how important it was for 5-year-old Sage and 3-year-old Rosemary to have been there. They both speak Spanish and English, and our mission team was surprised by how Sage and Rosemary immediately bonded with warmth and joy with the refugee children and others coming across the border.

When we pack for an unknown future, we're trusting that Jesus will lead us into that emerging future. It's going to be hard; it's going to be different, but God is still at work in this changing and uncertain world. One thing we know for sure is that it will not be boring. We need to be ready for surprises – that's part of our hope.

I'm wondering if one of the pieces of baggage that we need to leave behind is the name "Baptist" and become known simply as "Austin Heights Church?" We'll still be a Baptist church in all but name. We'll still organize and do things as a congregation, still claim our roots in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists and the 17<sup>th</sup> century Baptists like Roger Williams. Still claim our kinship with Walter Rauschenbusch, the founder of the Social Gospel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Martin Luther King, Jr. of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I'm simply wondering if the word "Baptist" in the world we're entering has become toxic. I want you to think about this and then we'll have an opportunity to talk later.

Another project Jane and I are working on is forming some kind of group for young adults as we face the unknown. Perhaps we'd meet once a month, I don't know, but I've been hearing from young adults with questions like, "Do we bring children into this climate changing world or not?" I'd like to talk about what our faith might teach us and why we need Christ-centered community to have and raise children or not. Jane and I would like to hear from you if you're interested in such a conversation. It's another way we're packing for an emergency.

It is true we are facing an unknown and uncertain future. But we are not the first to have both fear and hope in looking at such a future. So, we gather every Sunday to hear and re-hear stories of Israel and the church to encourage us and remind us of who we are and whose we are, and the hope we have that even in



changing and difficult circumstances, God is with us. Israel journeyed across the chaos of the desert following the Living God. It did not look good at first, but they made it, together. And there many other stories – I’m reminded of the puny shepherd boy David facing the giant Goliath. Probability said Goliath would destroy David, but David trusted that because of God, there was the possibility that he would win. We are a people with a long history of trusting in the possibilities of the Living God instead of the probabilities of the world.

Several months ago, Dr. Eric came by to pick up a book belonging to Valentina that they had left at our house. I walked out onto the front steps with him and noticed he was driving a very interesting, sleek car. It belonged to his father and was a Lucid, a new electric vehicle. I walked around admiring it and Eric said, “I have a few minutes before I need to get back to the practice, would you like me to give you a spin?” I said, “Sure,” and jumped in. It was beautiful with a futuristic dashboard and instrument panel, and it was quiet and smooth. We got to a place where there was no traffic anywhere in sight and a clear, straight road in front of us. He stopped the car, looked at me, smiled, and said, “Are you buckled in? Brace yourself.” And then he pressed the accelerator down. My head and body were shoved back into the seat, and I could feel the G-forces pressing down upon my body. It was the most incredible acceleration I have ever experienced in my life! And all I could say was, “Dadgum! Dadgum! Dadgum!”

Austin Heights is a community of disciples in Christ on an adventure together, traveling into an uncertain future. The community might look like an old Ford on the outside but when you show up, Jesus will smile and say to you, “Are you buckled in? Brace yourself.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.