

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
September 13, 2020

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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Exodus 14:19-31

Thus, the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; . . . So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. (Exodus 14:30-31 N.R.S.V.)

God Delivers

Not long ago I watched the net flicks series on basketball super star Michael Jordan. The series is called “The Last Dance.” It details how the Chicago Bulls, with Michael Jordan, won the NBA championship three years in a row. Something that only one other team had ever done. Then Jordan left basketball and played baseball for a couple of years. Jordan came back to basketball and the bulls won another unthinkable three championships in a row.

The series brought back a memory I had of watching the Bulls play in the final series of 1998. It was game six of a best of seven series. The Bulls had won three games and the Utah Jazz had won two games. If the Bulls won this game, they would clinch the championship. If the Jazz won this game, they would force a seventh game.

I remember that game six was played on a Sunday. There was a great rivalry between Jordan and Moses “the mailman” Malone of the Utah Jazz. And they did a lot of trash talk to each other. At one point Jordan taunted Malone that “the mailman doesn’t deliver on a Sunday.” Actually Malone had a pretty good game that Sunday afternoon, but he did fall short. The Bulls outscored the Jazz by one point, 87 to 86.

The question I want to look at today is not about basketball players delivering, nor about the post office delivering, but rather about God delivering. When the pressure is on, can we count on God to deliver?

It has been suggested that many so-called atheists will admit that there may be some kind of higher power out there. But they don’t believe in a God that will personally intervene and deliver them from trouble. They don’t believe in a God who cares about them, who is currently active, and who will be there for them. They don’t believe in a God who delivers in the here and now.

Some of you history buffs may know that Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of our country and the writer of the Declaration of Independence, had trouble with the idea of God acting in the here and now. Jefferson believed in what has been called the master clockmaker theory of God. He believed that in the beginning, God like a master clockmaker designed the world with all of the natural laws of cause and effect, set the world in motion as a clockmaker

would wind a clock, then left us to our own devices.

Our scripture lesson from Exodus is a witness to God delivering and acting in the here and now. God did not simply wind up the world and then leave us to our own devices. God intervenes in history to deliver us.

The book of Exodus begins in Egypt. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph had become enslaved by the Egyptian. Historians tell us that the slavery lasted about 400 years. That is a very long time. That is longer than the entire history of the United States.

The Hebrews had been slaves so long they forgot about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They stopped believing that God would deliver them. They only god that they saw in their day to day life was the god of the empire. The Egyptian empire had all the wealth and all the power. The Hebrews were slaves. They were not allowed to own anything, not even their own bodies, not even their own time. The Egyptian Empire seemed to be the only god that mattered.

Let me pause and ask if you have ever felt that way. Have you ever felt powerless? Have you ever felt that things were not right, but that you had no power to change them?

I remember my daughter bought an older and not in very good shape all wheel drive vehicle. The owner was not asking much for it, so she bought it. When she got to the DMV, they insisted she pay sales tax on a much higher amount, more than double what she had paid for it. It didn't matter what she had actually paid for it, she had to pay tax on what their book said the vehicle was worth. She felt powerless to fight the DMV. So she just paid what they asked. Have you ever had an experience like that?

I have a friend who was the manger of a theater. When Covid-19 came along, she was suddenly out of a job. She had absolutely no control over the matter. It didn't matter how long she had worked there or what a good job she was doing. She was out of a job.

Have you had an experience like that?

This last week marked the 19th anniversary of the terror attacks of 9/11. When all of those people were killed, many people were asking, "Where is God?" They weren't asking for God's physical address. They wanted to know if God could be counted on. Is God here for us? Will God act for us? Will God deliver?

That's what the Hebrew slaves were asking. It may even have been what Moses himself was asking. When God appeared to Moses in a bush that was on fire but was not being burned up, Moses asked, "Who are you?" And God had to remind him, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." God told Moses that he had been chosen to go down to Egypt and tell the Pharaoh to let God's people go.

Moses then asked, "And if the people ask, 'Who sent you?' What do I say?" God said tell them,

“I am, has sent me.”

Do you get the feeling that Moses is stalling here? He didn't really need to know God's name. He was worried that God would not deliver.

Eventually Moses is persuaded and he goes. He goes and tells the Pharaoh to let God's people go. And the people are so grateful that Moses is representing them. Wait! That is not right, is it? The people are furious with Moses. They scream at him, “You have only made things worse. Before the Egyptians gave us straw to make bricks. Now we have to gather our own straw.”

The people didn't believe that God had sent Moses or that he should be representing them. After all it is not like Moses was picked by a focus group. He didn't win an election. He wasn't picked by a personnel committee who went through hundreds of applications to find just the right candidate. He just showed up and said God sent me.

Moses was in a tight spot. But God did deliver. God sent 10 plagues upon the Egyptians. The last one was the worst. The first born child of every Egyptian family died all in a single night, along with the first born of their every animal. So great was their grief and shock that the Egyptians begged the Hebrews to leave.

So the Hebrews follow Moses out into the wilderness. And the presence of God goes before them as a cloudy pillar by day and a pillar of fire by night. All goes well for a bit, then Pharaoh changes his mind. I imagine all the business owners in Egypt were missing their free labor. They weren't about to do the hard work themselves. That was what slaves were for. So Pharaoh sends his army to force the Hebrews to return to their slavery.

The Hebrews are caught between the mighty army of the Egyptians and the waters of the Red Sea. Once again the people panic and blame both Moses and God for their situation. Once again the question arises, “Will God deliver?”

You know the answer, God parts the waters of the Red Sea and the Hebrews cross on dry land. When the Egyptian army tries to follow, God allows the sea to return and drowns that mighty army. The Hebrews don't have to lift a finger. God delivers and they are free.

Perhaps you are saying to yourself, “Why doesn't God come and rescue me like that? I am stuck in an impossible mess, why doesn't God come deliver me?”

It is a good question. But perhaps not the best question. The better question might be, why don't I see how God is delivering me? The witness of scripture is that time and again God does deliver. So why don't we see that?

Sometimes we don't see it because God gives us a different answer than what we are asking for. I imagine that some of the Hebrews trapped against the sea that day were praying that God would give them horses and chariots of their own. While he was out it, a few tanks and war planes would be good too.

Some of the Hebrews might have been praying that they could be magically transported back to Egypt. In a crisis some always just want to go back to the way things were. Chances are none of the Hebrews were praying for the seas to part and dry land appear. Yet that is what God did.

So maybe we don't see God delivering us, because we are not looking in the right place.

Another reason we may not see God delivering us, is because our society keeps trying to convince us that there is some other explanation for everything that happens. Our society keeps trying to deny the power of God and give alternative reasons for why things happen.

Some things have to be believed in order to be seen. You can bet that the Pharaoh came up with some other explanation for his army's defeat. If he had really seen the hand of God in what happened at the Red Sea, he would have converted then and there. But that didn't happen.

Does God deliver? Yes, God does indeed deliver. Time and again scripture bears witness to that. God saves the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery. God brings the Israelites into the promised land and defeats their enemies. God saves David's life when King Saul is trying to kill him. God saves Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace. God saves Daniel in the lion's den.

Jesus heals the sick, raises the dead, feeds the five thousand, walks on water, calms the storm, is resurrected from the dead himself. God saves the Apostle Paul when he is bitten by a deadly serpent. The stories go on and on.

However, sometimes just hearing the stories is not enough. Sometimes we have to experience God for ourselves. There too God helps us and sends us his Holy Spirit.

Maybe you have cancer and the odds are greatly against you. Yet, five years later you are not only alive, you are cancer free. And you know, you know deep down in your heart, God delivers.

Maybe you have a daughter who is caught up in drugs. You see her wasting away. You try everything you can and nothing works. You are losing her.

Then one day, she comes back. She tells you that she has had a great spiritual experience and she has changed. You are hesitating to believe. After all you have heard that bit about being a changed person before and it wasn't true. But this time, this time, she really is a changed person. God has delivered. And you know that, because you have experienced it for yourself.

Wherever you are today. Whatever you are facing. No matter how impossible the odds seem. Know that God can be trusted to deliver. It may not be in the way you were hoping, but the Holy Spirit can help you see that delivery with the eyes of faith. It may take a personal spiritual experience for you to know this deep in your being. God can be trusted to send the Holy Spirit to give you that experience.

Believe it, my friends. God delivers. Amen.