

Canoeing the Mountains¹

Exodus 1:8-10, Philippians 1:3-11

October 28, 2018

Presbytery of Western North Carolina

Exodus 1:1-14

8 Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

9 And he said to his people,

"Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us.

10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war befall us, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Philippians 1:3-11

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Sermon

He dipped his hands into the icy water
and took a long, cool drink.

Behind him was fifteen months of hard travel...

day after backbreaking day
slogging upstream in his canoe.

And standing there at that spring,

Meriwether Lewis thought back on all he had been through:

- nervous nights in a strange land
- mosquitoes and grizzly bear galore...
- a dark, cold winter and the death of a companion.

But now he was here.

Lewis and a small scouting party

¹ This sermon was inspired by my participation as an apprentice in the Pneumatrix Program of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina. The primary text as a book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, by Tod Bolsinger, on which I draw heavily.

had gone ahead of the rest of the Corps of Discovery.
They had followed a trail up a creek
and now were at the spring itself.
This little trickle was the source of the mighty Missouri River...
this cool, clean water would flow
all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.
Which meant the hardest part (the upstream part)
was now behind him.
Or so he thought.

For over three hundred years
explorers had been searching for a water route
connecting St. Louis, MO. to the Pacific Ocean.
Everyone believed there was one...
including President Thomas Jefferson
who commissioned Lewis and Clark to find it.
And for Meriwether Lewis,
quenching his thirst from that little stream
meant he was about to do it -
he was about to do what countless pioneers before him
had only dreamed of doing –
discovering the highly prized Northwest Passage.
You see, Lewis believed that from that spring
he would walk up the hill...
look down a gentle slope and see the Columbia River.
His men would launch their canoes
and paddle (this time with the current)
all the way to the Pacific.
He could not have been more disappointed...
because what Lewis actually discovered
was that three hundred years of experts
had been completely and utterly wrong.
In front of him was NOT a gentle slope
that trailed down to the Columbia River.
In front of him was (what?) - the Rocky Mountains.
One enormous mountain peak after another...
as far as the eyes could see.
There WAS no Northwest Passage...
no navigable river... no water route...
because the assumption of the brightest explorers...
the wisdom of the most creative leaders was... wrong.

Truth is that Lewis and Clark
had been warned there would be mountains.

The Mandan tribe had told them
but when THEY thought of mountains
they pictured the rounded, tree-topped bluffs of the Appalachians.

Challenging, but manageable.

They had never seen anything like THESE mountains
they had no mental model for what they were facing
because no American eyes
had ever seen mountains like that.

And as a result
everything Meriwether Lewis assumed about his journey
had to change...
including the all-important mode of transportation
he had planned to use.

He had planned to explore the new world by boat.
Lewis was a river explorer...
that's what he knew how to do...
that's what he was good at...
and he truly believed he would row his way to the Pacific.

Yet standing there before the Rocky Mountains,
he quickly realized that everything he had accomplished
was just a prelude to what was to come.

Lewis and Clark were about to march off all their maps.
One historian notes
that they knew less about the American West
than Neil Armstrong knew about the moon.

At least Armstrong had pictures of the moon,
but for Lewis and Clark there were no pictures...
no maps... no GPS to lead them to their destination.

They were entering uncharted territory
where no non-native person had ever been.

And one thing was clear:
what lay in front of them
was nothing like what lay behind them.

And if they were to go forward
and accomplish their mission
they would have to give up their old assumptions...
change their expectations...
because the real adventure... the real discovery...
the next part of the journey was just beginning.

And of course, there was the issue of their boats... their canoes...
no matter how hard you paddle,
it's really, really hard to a canoe the mountains.

As I have participated as an apprentice

in our Pneumatrix program this past year
I have returned again and again
to this metaphor as a way to talk about
the historical moment we find ourselves in as a church.
It is a helpful image, I think, as we wrestle
with what we are experiencing in many parts of our lives –
in business or education...
in civic organizations or politics...
in parenting and growing old...
in every facet of life, we are realizing
that the world in front of us
is radically different from the world behind us...
and that the tools that once worked so well
in the world behind us
(the canoes that got us to where we are today)...
well, these tools are not so effective
in the world that's in front of us.

This is not "late breaking news" of course...
we've been talking about this
at least as long as I've been a pastor...
we've been talking about how MUCH
and how FAST things are changing...
and about how we in the church (especially the mainline church)
really don't know what to do
now that the cultural rug
has been pulled out from under us.

Well, you may be wondering
why I read the story from Exodus, chapter 1.
I did that just to remind us
that we're not the first group of God's people
to be abandoned by the culture around them.
Exodus, chapter one tells the story the Israelites told each other
to help them make sense of how they had fallen
from a favored position in Egypt
to being slaves.
You recall that Joseph rose through the ranks
to be Pharaoh's right-hand man...
and how during the famine all his family followed him to Egypt
where he took care of them.
But time passed... and those people got old...
and the text tells us that eventually Joseph
and his whole generation died.

That's when the shift began.
The Egyptians began to see the Israelites
more as a threat than an asset.
The Israelites were prolific and grew in number
and the new Pharaohs oppressed them to control them.
And the key "pivot point" for this story is the line,
"And then there arose a new king, who knew not Joseph."
It seems to me that today (a few thousand years later)
we can say: "And then there arose a new culture,
who knew not the church."²

For seventeen hundred years,
Christianity stood at the privileged center
of Western cultural life.
Historians refer to period as "Christendom. "
In this country, Christendom gave us
"blue laws" and the Ten Commandments in school.
It gave us "under God" in the pledge of allegiance
and daily Bible readings in national newspapers.
There was a day when every city planner
laid out the town square with the courthouse, the library,
and the "First-Church-of-whomever-got-there-first"
all in the center of the city.

But now...
eminent domain laws are used to replace churches
with "revenue generating big-box stores...
now Sundays are as much about soccer, swimming, and Starbucks
as about Sabbath...
now Christian student groups are derecognized
on university campuses all over the country...
and now the fastest growing religious affiliation
among young adults is "none."
Which means that at this time in our history,
the church finds itself a lot like Meriwether Lewis did
standing before the Rocky Mountains –
the adventure... the discovery...
the next part of our journey is just beginning.

And as did Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery,
we are realizing a couple of key things.
First, that there are no experts...

² Thanks to Rev. Jim Kitchens for this summary of a Bible study he led during a presentation to our presbytery's Pneumatrix program.

no sure-fire programs...no quick fixes out there...
if by quick fix we mean a young, hip preacher
or an "off the charts" praise band...
or the latest and greatest evangelism program...
or a Christian yoga class in the fellowship hall
that will suddenly make the church "relevant".
And perhaps more important, there are no "experts."
There is no one to give us the answer.
There are only "learners" –
pastors and elders and presbytery staff
who are able to ask the right questions
and try different things...
and who are willing to change and grow themselves.
There are only learners.
Whether pastor or ruling elder,
most of us here this morning were trained as "river explorers."
We have the right equipment... we know what to do...
and we can make headway
as long as we have our canoes and paddles
and there's plenty of water in the river.
We now must become mountaineers...
we've got to put on some new gear...
learn some new things...
develop some new skills.
And it's one of those new skills
that is the second thing I wish to leave you with this morning.
It is the skill of "re-framing" –
it's the ability to consider different ways
of seeing the challenges that are in front of us...
it's the freedom to try new things
(some of which will inevitably fail)...
and it's the willingness to keep asking questions.
Questions like this:
Is the church of Jesus Christ truly in decline?
We all hear a lot about how the church is in decline...
but is that really true?
Or is it that the Christendom form of church life
that has so dominated Europe and America for centuries
is now less effective?

Or this:

***Does dwindling church attendance
mean that people are less interested in God?***

You're observant people –

surely you've noticed church attendance
is not what it once was fifty or even twenty years ago.
Does that mean that people are less interested in God?
Or is it that society has just stopped giving preference
to churches on Sunday mornings?

Or finally this:

***Is this loss of cultural support for the church
a real THREAT to Christian witness?***

Or is it an opportunity
for us to learn new things about God and about ourselves...
an opportunity to listen keenly to God's voice
and trust God's promises...
an opportunity to see this presbytery
and each of our congregations
as playing a vital role in God's mission today?
Threat? Or opportunity? What do you think?

To be completely honest, I go back and forth.

There are times when I think that I... WE...
are just not up to the challenge.

There are times I wonder.

But then I remember something – Christians are resurrection people!
We are an Easter people!

And if there's one thing Easter is about
it's about reframing what we assume to be "reality"...
it's about God doing something completely unexpected...
it's about a future that looks nothing like the past...

and let's remember, it's about a God
who didn't need the help of blue laws
or "under God" in the pledge of allegiance
or any other special preferences
to raise the dead or inspire a church.

So, my question to you is, "What do you think?"

Pastors and elder leaders
of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina...
what do you think?

Shall we come together
to form our own Discovery Corps and march off the map?

Shall we come together
and trade in our canoes for mountaineering gear?

Shall we come together to ask questions
and try new things and learn new skills?

Shall we come together to seize this opportunity

REMEMBERING that the One who created the Church...
is the very One will finish the good work begun in us...
and will never, ever be left without a witness.
Shall we?