

sermon-9/14/08 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Celebrations in the Wilderness”  
Ex. 14:19-15:11; !5:20-21  
By Jim Patton

September is a time of transitions. School begins, or at least we hope it will begin in the Bellevue schools! Those going to a new school, whether they are starting kindergarten, moving to mid-high or high school or going off to college for the first time know how big a transition this beginning of the school year can be. There are new teachers to get used to, new schedules, and even moving away from home for the first time. I remember dropping our daughter off at college her first year at the College of Wooster and the President of the college telling the freshmen class to be kind to their parents because they were the empty seat in the car when their parents returned home!

The transitions this year are not limited to school. Because this is an election year, our whole country will be experiencing a transition when we elect a new president. While the campaigning has seemed endless and, at times, obnoxious, there is no getting around the importance of this transition for our country and the rest of the world for that matter.

And if you are not spinning with all these transitions, Newport Church is going through its own set of transitions. Today we start a slightly new Sunday morning schedule. We have moved from two part-time music directors to one full time director and are beginning to see the fruits of that decision with a larger choir. The Sunday evening youth schedule has changed adding a time for music and a meal for families.

All of that is significant, and I have not even mentioned the biggest transition: our remodeling project. If the presidential election process has seemed endless, our remodeling project is not far behind.

It is easy to be anxious when things change. Even seemingly small transitions require us to adapt. It is easy to grumble when things don't go as expected. Believe me, when the automatic lights in the new west bathrooms were not functioning properly, leaving me in the dark during a delicate time, waving my arms to try and trip the motion censor, you could have heard me grumble! It was easy to long for the past when things were manual. It was easy to forget the fact that we have bathrooms that are clean and odor free and not an embarrassment to show our guests. Yes, change is difficult.

It is important to find time to celebrate the transitions even though they are not easy. Celebrations help us sense God's presence in the midst of changes. Celebrations are useful when they don't discount our anxiety or frustrations, but help us see that there is a bigger picture that can help give perspective to the changes that come our way.

It is fortuitous, then, that our scripture passage for today presents the Exodus story. We read how the Israelites escaped from the Egyptian army as they crossed the Red Sea. We read the song of celebration sung by Moses and then Miriam. This pivotal point in the

Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land is so symbolically rich. It is an ancient story that speaks to our modern condition.

Before we unpack how this scripture can be helpful for us to understand our own transition times, we need to deal with one obvious, but troubling part of this story. The God we encounter in the book of Exodus is a warrior God who takes sides. This God seems to be very partisan.

Just last week I said in the sermon that God is not a red state or a blue state God. But here in the Bible God seems to be a god who loves the Israelites more than the Egyptians. If you go back in the story and read about the plagues where God is said to have killed the first born of every Egyptian family, it only gets more troublesome. What are we to do with this image of a warrior God who either kills innocent people or encourages the Israelites to slaughter others?

Jewish scholars have wondered the same thing. Down through the years the Jewish community has relied on what they call a midrash. These are commentaries on the text of the Bible that help us see the meaning when things are unclear. In one midrash on our text for today a Jewish scholar tells the story of the angels in heaven wanting to sing a song of praise when they saw the Egyptian army drowning in the sea. They were so happy for the Israelite slaves who were set free from certain destruction by this miracle. Right before they begin to sing, the author of this story has God say to them, "My children, the works of my hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter a song in my presence?!"

These Jewish scholars are saying to us we need to be very careful taking these Bible stories literally. God is not a god who loves one nation more than another. While God certainly does not like to see injustice, or one nation oppressing those in their midst, God does not take delight in anyone drowning in the sea.

Reading this Exodus story today we need to recognize this is told from the Israelite point of view. If you read the whole Exodus story carefully, you will find exaggerations. The story is very one-sided where the Israelites are the good guys and other nations don't seem to count.

But, as with any biblical story, God speaks to us even in spite of those problems. This story is talking about bigger and deeper realities than the partisan tale we read on the surface. There are some deep truths in the Exodus story that have made it the most important story in all the Old Testament for Jews and one the New Testament captures in our understanding of baptism and the saving role of Jesus in our lives.

This is a story of a motley crew of slaves becoming a people. It is a story about the difficulty of moving from one way of life to another, from slavery to freedom. It is a story about being hedged in by danger with no easy way forward. It is a story about the need to cross over the waters of chaos, with God's help, so we can continue on this difficult journey.

The Israelites will need to leave the past behind. They will need to let go of the nostalgia for how things used to be when they were settled in Egypt. Sure they were slaves, but at least they knew where their next meal would come from. Now they faced an uncertain future on the road to freedom. Can they trust God's presence enough to take the next step?

As we know, they did trust God and crossed the sea on dry land. Once they were free from all that had held them in bondage, it was time to celebrate. Moses sings a song of praise.

We need to remember the journey was hardly over when they crossed the Red Sea. They were safe for now, but they would have forty long years of wandering in the wilderness before they reached the Promised Land. They would have many more moments of danger, of grumbling, and then rescue in their journey toward home.

We are reminded that it is important to celebrate and give thanks to God in the midst of the wilderness. It is important to recognize God's presence in those moments of liberation, in those times when we glimpse new insights, in those moments when we are able to let go of the past and move toward an unknown future. Celebrations remind us the source of any new life, the source of any liberation, is God. Celebrations in the wilderness ground us as a community and encourage us to keep going.

Our rededication service on October fifth when we thank God for this newly remodeled sanctuary, will be one of those moments of celebration. We know the remodeling project is far from over. We know there will be more inconveniences to come. But God has been good to us in this process. When there seemed to be no way forward when faced with raising over one million dollars, hearts were touched and the money was pledged. People gave willingly of their time, treasure and talents to bring us to this point.

Let us, then, enter this September, this time of personal transitions and changes, this time when the future is unknown and anxieties can creep into our hearts, this time of new programs, expanded leadership, and big changes in our building here at Newport, with thankful hearts. Let us sense God hidden in the midst of the events swirling around us. It is good to be on this journey together. While the end of the journey may seem far off, we know we are ultimately at home in God's presence even in the wilderness. Amen

