

Sermon (9/17/17, Exodus 14: 19-31):

When I was younger, I enjoyed watching a television show called ‘MacGyver’. MacGyver was a secret agent often sent on dangerous missions that, inevitably, got him into situations that seemed all but inescapable. Yet, he never lost his cool. Miraculously, he stayed calm and, using his scientific knowledge, he thought of some ingenious ways to escape using whatever he had on him or his accompanying friends had on them – a comb, a used piece of gum, a paper clip, a shoelace, a piece of wire he found on the ground...just about anything was fair game! With a twist, a bend, and maybe even a spark, they’d soon be on their way just in the nick of time.

Oh, to be able to stay calm and thoughtful in situations that feel so dire and ominous! It’s not an easy thing to do.

It’s difficult to imagine how incredibly frightened the Israelites must have been in today’s story. In front of them was the Red Sea - a watery wall blocking their way forward. To their rear, they saw Pharaoh’s angry army coming towards them. The situation seemed dire and there was no MacGyver around to fashion them a bridge using a few toothpicks and chewing gum. All seemed lost.

Understandably, the people cried out in dismay. ‘Why, Moses, why did you bring us here? Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you had to take us out to the wilderness to die?’

Faith is hard. It sometimes takes a lot of out of us. It’s seldom just a matter of saying a few magical words and faith comes rushing in on a white horse to save the day. No, faith waxes and wanes. Faith sometimes feels easy and sometimes we must fight for it with every fiber of our being. Sometimes God feels close and sometimes God feels painfully absent. It happens to the best of us. Belief takes work. Belief takes the push and pull of being in community with one another. Belief needs friends who will pray and believe for us when our inner wells have run dry. Faith requires study, prayer, and discomfort as it stretches us to see things in a new way.

Not only was this an incredibly frightening moment for the Israelites but I’m guessing for Moses too. For one, he was the lightning rod of the

people's fear and fury like most religious leaders tend to be. Second of all, when God does act to save his people God leaves Moses in a most vulnerable and frightening position.

Up until this point, there have been God directed pillars of clouds leading the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt. These clouds directed their path. These clouds were their leaders. Maybe Moses did some cheerleading in the background but, as far as leading, well, that was up to the clouds. Got complaints? Direct them to those pillars of clouds up front!

When those clouds moved to the back to protect the Israelites, that had to be a bit frightening for Moses. Suddenly, he was all alone in the leadership position. Suddenly all eyes were on him as to what was next. Suddenly, Moses looked as if and must have felt as if he was on his own to get his people out of this mess. What would he do? Is there a MacGyver in the house?

Okay, so the Israelites are terrified and Moses is terrified and here's a real kicker...God seems to have a hand in all this terror. Have you ever noticed that each time one of these plagues was set loose in the hope of convincing Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, God steps in and hardens Pharaoh's heart just when Pharaoh begins to capitulate?!

What kind of God is this? On the one hand God makes all these promises to set his people free. He pushes Moses out of his comfortable life in Midian to make him God's agent. (A job Moses never wanted.) And while God has Moses doing all these nasty little magic tricks to convince Pharaoh he's no match for the God of the Hebrew people, God's in the background, hardening Pharaoh's heart!

Well, not long after the final plague where the lives of the Egyptian firstborns were taken, Pharaoh finally relents and releases the Israelites. Once again, however, yes, you guessed it, God hardened Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh regrets letting all those Hebrew minions go. So, Pharaoh sends out his army to bring them back.

What is with this hardening of Pharaoh's heart thing? Is this some kind of heavenly joke gone awry? It's the kind of stuff that makes your skin crawl, doesn't it? Not only do we have to deal with often finding

ourselves backed into inescapable corners but, now, we have to wonder if God has somehow had a hand in putting us there! Really?

Faith is tough. Beware of those who suggest it's as easy as following step 1 and step 2. Beware also of those who suggest that our faith is weak when we let fear get the best of us. Faith is tough and confusing just like it was for the Israelites. Faith is also tough for those whom God calls to lead us such as it was for Moses. If you feel and sense and wrestle with the struggle that often comes with faith, let me assure you, you're in good company...even the company of the Israelites who saw more visible signs of God's miraculous ways than most of us ever will and even for Moses who met God at a burning bush!

And, so, we ask again, what's with this God who kept hardening Pharaoh's heart? Why did God set this whole rescue mission into motion if God only intended to keep thwarting it behind the scenes?

Well, frankly, I'm not sure but there is this line a few paragraphs back that caught my attention. It's a line from a chat that God had with Moses where God tells Moses to have the Israelites set up camp right next to the shores of the Red Sea. In that little speech, God plainly tells Moses what's going to happen.

“This is the deal, Moses. I'm going to harden Pharaoh's heart [let me repeat that in case you missed it. God said...] I am going to harden Pharaoh's heart and when I do, Pharaoh's going to send his army after you while you're out here camping like a bunch of sitting ducks.”

Yes, it's right there...Chapter 14 verse 4. God told Moses what he's been doing behind the scenes and God just told Moses that Pharaoh's army is on its way to take them down. And then God says this, ‘I am doing this so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am Lord’. Wait! Hold the Guacamole! The primary goal of this whole story is not about the Israelites or Moses or the Pharaoh or Egypt but it's about who God is! ‘I will gain glory for myself!’ In and through this story; this strange and hard to understand story, God will reveal who God is. God will show all of creation the heart of God.

Well, in all honesty, it's kind of a relief when you think about it. If it was just about the Israelites or if it was just about reluctant Moses who would have preferred to stay a Shepherd, these folks would still be in Egypt. They would have conceded the hopelessness of their situation and just given up. They would have chosen to stay slaves in Egypt just as we so often do when it comes to those powers, those obsessions, those idols that enslave us. 'Better the devil you know than the one you don't.' As they say. They would have deserted this whole faith thing, this whole God thing as soon as they smelled the slightest stench of danger. And so, thank goodness this story is about God and thank goodness this is about God showing us what holy glory looks like and thank goodness this is a story about what God makes possible even when our faith is hanging by a thread.

And here's what God's glory looks like...even when we're scared, God is going to provide a way. Even when all things look lost...God is going to make a way. Even when death seems all but certain, God is going to move heaven and earth to rescue us. God's glory, God's faithfulness is not contingent upon our ability to hold fast to God without question, doubt, or fear. When the world seems like it's collapsing, when the casket of one whom we love has been bolted shut, when the floods come rolling in to steal from us every precious memory and every possession we had, when the Dreamers are told they don't belong, when the demonized are told they aren't welcome, when hate finds a voice in those who reject others because of the color of their skin or the brand of their faith or just because they seem strange, God is going to find a way. God will blow upon the waters, separating them, so that his people can finally move from slavery to freedom, from despair to hope, from Good Friday to Easter, from tears to joy.

As strange as this story might seem, this is, ultimately, a story about God telling us to hang on, even when we don't understand; hang on even when fear and despair calls for our allegiance; hang on even when we can barely see what's in front us because of the tears flooding our eyes. From death to life, from slavery to freedom, God will find a way. The waters will part. The baptismal waters will splash and God will again say, this is

my Beloved. Hang on, don't give up, keep trying to believe even when you feel like you're only going through the motions. The glory of God will make a way even in the stickiest of situations! And, guess what. Not even MacGyver can top that one!

To God alone be all the glory! Amen