

SERMON

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Trust in God

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Exodus 14:19-31

Have you ever been in a situation when you just weren't sure where you were, when you felt that you were lost, perhaps a little afraid, & you just had to depend on someone else to help you?

I remember when I was trekking in the Serengeti in East Africa. There were about four of us in the party, we were all backpackers from various parts of the world, all in our late 20's. We had chosen to take a walking Safari that included 4 days walking in the Serengeti with our Maasai guide. As we journeyed further and further, we realized that there were no paths, there were no maps, and that we needed to completely trust our guide, who spoke little English. On about half through the second day, when the sun was pretty hot in the sky, our guide suddenly motioned to us to huddle together. It took us a while to figure out what he was trying to get us to do, and we really had no idea why, but he was very emphatic, so we all joined in a small circle, huddled down on the ground, and covered our heads with our hands. And I can tell you – I was terrified. Thoughts went through my head of being abducted for slavery, being killed; I just had no idea what was going on or what to expect – and as our guide hurriedly threw a tarp from our tent over us as we huddled on the ground, I became even more afraid. But within moments of being covered, I understood the urgency. A freak wind tunnel was passing through the Serengeti, and the sand and debris was being blasted around like a tornado. We had not known it was coming, but our guide felt it while it was still far away. He knew that our best way to avoid getting blinded by the flying and stinging sand, was to huddle together for safety and to shelter each other. All we knew, was that we had to trust him.

The story of the Israelites fleeing from Egypt is a bit like that. They had been slaves in Egypt for many years, in fact Exodus 12:40 tells us that they had been enslaved for 430 years. We know from reading Exodus story that they often cried to God to be delivered from the hands that enslaved them. Then one day, God spoke to Moses telling him that it was time for him to lead the Israelites to freedom. So, they quickly gathered what little they could, and they left Egypt. We are told that they had to leave so quickly, that the bread did not have time to rise – it was unleavened bread. Picture the scene with me. Exodus 12:37 tells us:

about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. ³⁸A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds. ³⁹They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

It's a picture that reminds us of the images present day refugees leaving Syria, but the numbers today are far greater. United Nations report that more than 5 million Syrians have had to leave their country. The similarities of history being repeated is daunting:

- The refugees have been unable to live in freedom, enslaved in their own country.
- They have to escape to safety just like the Israelites.
- They have walked miles and miles to safe borders.
- They have with them what little they can carry.
- There are men, women, children, young and old.
- They are willing to put their lives in peril in search of a better world.

The similarities go on and on. But I think that the message for us today is that the refugees, just like the Israelites, live in hope. The Israelites did not know where God would lead them, but they had faith and hope in God. As they camped in the wilderness not knowing where they were going, they faithfully obeyed God's word, brought to them through Moses. They trusted God.

But, trusting when you don't know what to expect is difficult and scary. When I hid under the tarp in the Serengeti, I was scared. When the Israelites could feel the ground shake with the thunder of 600 Egyptian chariots hurtling towards them, they were afraid! Exodus 14:10 tells us that:

In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD.

And, imagine how terrifying it must have been as they walked through the Red Sea, with walls of water towering over them on both sides of them. I am sure that they were petrified, and yet they trusted God.

And, we can not ignore how they must have felt as they stood on the other side and saw the bodies of the Egyptians washed up on the shore. I do not think they had tears of joy, but tears of fear – what would the future hold for them?

Our United Church today is at a crossing point, just like the Red Sea. We are about to leave behind many old things, and we need to Trust God for the journey ahead. In the restructuring months ahead, we will be giving up some of familiar practices and venture forth in new ways. Congregations will begin to be called Communities of Faith working in cluster groups for networking and support. Presbyteries and Conferences will become one body known as Regional Councils, and all will be under a Denominational Council. No one knows quite what it will look like. The path forward is not always clear. But the Israelites trusted that God was leading them, and we as a church must trust that God is leading us, even when the way forward seems uncertain and possibly treacherous.

In our personal lives, maybe you have also been in a situation of uncertainty; a time when you faced the fear of the unknown, and the need to trust God. Perhaps you or your partner have received some news about a job loss? Or you have experienced a breakdown in a relationship? Or frightening news about the health of yourself or of a loved one. These are all situations when suddenly your world is turned upside down, when the rug is pulled out from under you. Suddenly you do not know what the future holds for you. It's scary, and you just have to trust that everything will be OK.

Change was not easy for the Israelites. It is not easy for the refugees. It is not easy for us today. There is no map to guide our footsteps. But remember, even in their darkest hour, faced with the certainty and fear of death, God was with the Israelites. From Exodus 15 we read these words:

"In your steadfast love, you lead the people ... you guided them by your strength."

In our personal journeys, and in the road that we travel as a United Church, may we trust that we are not alone; let us trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in our journeys ahead. Take hope that God will give us strength for every stage of the journey. Listen to the Spirit's breath of courage, or the voice of wisdom. And let us trust that God will guide us to a better place, so that we can handle even the unexpected sandstorms ... and for that we give thanks. AMEN