

-Many of you are aware of a routinely meeting on Tuesdays at 10:45am every week that I try to attend called Textstudy. This gathering of Lutheran pastors in the Missoula area has been done for decades and provides space not only to dig into the coming scripture texts and talk about sermon ideas for the coming Sunday, but also to connect on a deeper level with my fellow Lutheran pastors-all of whom have become close friends over the years. As you might expect, the mood of these gatherings fluctuates every week depending on what is going on and I am continually amazed at how open our group is with one another. This past week, I really felt the shared mood being uncertain and a little anxious. Budget uncertainty for many churches, changing of ministries uncertainty, uncertainty about the smoke and environment, family uncertainty, political uncertainty, etc. It was evident on most of the pastors faces (including my own I am sure): chaos and uncertainty is tiring.

-Maybe you can relate a little bit to this, too. Maybe your job is not as certain as you would like, or your health is up and down. Maybe you have family members who have unpredictable behavior which can be damaging or the barrage of natural disaster news is just kinda getting to you. Chaos and uncertainty is tiring.

-It was, as a matter of fact, for ancient Israel as well. It's funny how we think of the challenges of the ancient world as very different from our own, but sometimes I wonder. Sure, there wasn't the medical drugs and technology then like we have today. People died all the time from ailments like dysentery, polio, skin diseases, and pneumonia. But today we have superbugs, cancer, alzheimer's, and other types of sickness that are just as scary. Sure, the ancient Israelites did not have modern diplomatic relationships like we do today with other countries and were incredibly vulnerable to any king who "just wanted more" and would expand their empire whatever the number of human lives were lost. But today, we have nuclear bombs, the internet which can cripple entire elections, and more sophisticated special forces units that can do incredible damage without really being traced. Sure, the ancient Israelites had frequent challenges with the natural world that we don't: storms that would sink entire fleets of boats, drought that would leave entire kingdoms without any food or water, and earthquakes which could consume entire ancient villages. Yet 2017 is on course for being the hottest year on record for the entire earth, possibly beating the current hottest year on record: 2016. The city of Houston was doused with 51.88 inches (close to 4.5 feet) of rain during Hurricane Harvey: the highest total for a single storm ever recorded in the history of the USA. The city of Boston's sky last week had a tinge of red in it from smoke coming from our own Missoula fires, fires that are getting hotter, bigger, and smokier with more impact every year.

-Sometimes I wonder whether we really are that separated from the challenges and chaos of ancient Israel.

-Which is why, I think, this Exodus story stuck out to many of us at textstudy this past week.

-Like in many well told stories which stand the test of time, there are many symbols in this story of the Israelites fleeing from the Egyptians that are important for us to see today. One symbol that is very important throughout the entire Old Testament as well as Ancient Israel culture is "the sea". The sea in most stories of the Old Testament represents chaos: something that you didn't want to mess with. The sea was home to great sea creatures that could tip or even swallow your entire boat, create storms that wash you away, or usher in winds that could batter you and erode entire rock features away. The sea was the unknown, and here Moses and the Israelites were face to face with it. Face to face with chaos. Yet another fearful thing was right behind them: Pharaoh's army. Thus, Moses and Israel were faced with a choice: move forward into the chaotic unknown or go back to slavery. It's amazing how much I can relate to the Israelite's kinda twisted logic here. "Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians. For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." This is actually not very true because we know Pharaoh was murdering Israelites and subjecting them to tortuous working conditions. But here's the thing: it's what they knew. Isn't it crazy how even if our situation is bad and/or even dangerous, we still are really tempted to go back because it is what we know.

-In a training on abusive relationships I took in seminary, the trainer always talked about the magic number 7. It takes statistically, on average, 7 times of "promising action" for a woman in a dangerous and abusive relationship to actually physically leave the relationship. Why? Because staring chaos and the unknown in the face is much scarier than going back to something that is unhealthy (or even dangerous) but that is a known quantity.

-It feels like in many ways our world and our church are staring at the sea right now, doesn't it? Like the Israelites, I sometimes would much rather go back to the known verses walk into the unknown. I would much rather buy whatever I wanted than have to think of the costly impacts of our consumerist society on a changing climate. I would rather sometimes not have to deal with different perspectives and cultures in making a decision verses intentionally listening and hearing other's points of view. I would rather just simply "wait for new people to come through our church doors" then go out and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in new ways. Yet, we can't go back. The Israelites, I think in their heart-of-hearts, knew they couldn't go back either. Going back means death.

-A couple thoughts: "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea." To me, this is where the strength of stepping forward starts. You have all of this chaos, in front and in back of you and then God says to Moses: stretch out your hand. Even in the text itself, it seems to me as a counter weight to the highly charged language of the Israelites. When do we need to stretch out our hands? When do we sometimes need to stretch out and reach for God?

-”But Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.....[So] the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.” A really wise colleague at text study (Pastor Joe Wahlin, I know you all know him!) said this that really caught me: “You know my frustration with this story? It’s that the Israelites never seem to get to the other side of chaos.” Sure they may get to the other side of the sea, but then they encounter starvation, in-fighting, foreign enemies, and all sorts of other types of chaos. That seems to be my problem, Joe shared, is that you think it’s all going to be over with and then you have to continue again and again. You never stop facing chaos, but in our walk with Christ, you get glimpses (or tastes) of peace which keep you going.

-The problems and chaos of our world will continue but, “do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today..” Maybe our job is not to “fully arrive” but to keep stretching out our hands in order to get tastes. Tastes that keep us going.

-”Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” (Revelation 21:1) “and the sea was no more.” That’s what keeps us going. God’s promises hold fast, even when face to face with chaos. We will get there, I promise you. I can taste it. Amen.