

“Traveling With The Ark”

Numbers 14:39-45

The true story is told of a teacher who lost her life savings in a scam. In one of those “too good to be true” moments, a path to financial abundance was elaborately explained to her by a con artist and she bought in. When her investment disappeared and she found her dreams shattered, the woman went to the Better Business Bureau. “Why on earth didn’t you come to us first?” an official asked her. “Didn’t you know about the Better Business Bureau?” “Oh, yes,” the woman replied sadly. “I’ve always known about you. But I didn’t come because I was afraid you would tell me not to do it.” (*Interpretation*, Spring Quarter @1989, p. 45.)

In the verses we read moments ago, a group of people got advice before setting out on a fool-hearty scheme. In their case, they even received strong counsel not to proceed, yet chose to ignore that guidance and do what they had planned. As a result, they suffered a great loss, too.

Our text tells of that occasion centuries ago when the Israelites decided it was time to invade the Promised Land. In the events prior to our text—scenes we have explored here in recent weeks--the chosen people received a report on the land God had promised would be theirs. Twelve Israelite spies had thoroughly surveyed conditions in Canaan, but only two of them thought the people could successfully conquer it. The other ten inflamed the crowd into a state of panic suggesting Canaan was occupied by giants and as a result, the people decided not to enter the Promised Land, but instead to head back for Egypt. God was incensed upon hearing that response and told Moses he would wipe out the Israelites and start over with Moses’ descendants as a new chosen nation. That servant intervened on behalf of the people with the result that God relented, announcing that the Israelites would live, but the next day head back to the wilderness. In verses we did not read here, God then detailed they would wander one year for each day the spies had been in Canaan—thus forty years—and the ten spies who doubted God’s promise to enter the territory die from some undefined plague. After all those events, our passage begins.

Moses tells the people what God has said about returning to the wilderness and the Israelites start to mourn. They realize what they have done and decide it’s time to make amends so the next morning they go to Moses and say “Here we are. We will go up to the place that the LORD has promised, for we have sinned.” To my ears, that response sounds like repentance. The people realize they were wrong to doubt God’s promises and now are ready to act upon what they should have done as soon as the spies completed their report. In most moments, that would have been just the kind of response Moses would want, yet on this day he tries to dissuade them.

“Why do you continue to transgress the command of the LORD?” he asks. “That will not succeed. Do not go up, for the LORD is not with you; do not let yourselves be struck down before your enemies.” Moses is telling them it is true God has relented from killing them for their unfaithfulness. It is true God has forgiven them even though they initially rejected his gift of land, but it is also true God has vowed all who had doubted their ability to enter Canaan will spend forty years in the wilderness. So when the people announce they are now ready to enter the land, Moses tells them to stop. “You shall fall by the sword, because you have turned back from following the LORD, the LORD will not be with you.” He could not have been any clearer, yet the people do not listen. “But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country,” we read “even though the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and Moses, had not left the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them...”

In the remaining weeks of this summer, we will explore some of the events from that forty-year period in the wilderness, yet on this day, stop where they should have stopped; with the moment they learned of God’s will. The better course of action for the Israelites in that occasion would have been to wipe away their tears and reluctantly start packing for a four- decade journey, yet they make a bad choice instead; to disregard God again. The narrator of our text ominously describes their response by noting “they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country even though the ark of the covenant of the Lord and Moses had not left the camp.”

We read of the ark several weeks ago. It was that chest transported on poles which held the tablets upon which the Ten Commandments had been written. More than a portable National Archives, the ark symbolized the very presence of God. The ark had led the way for the people as they journeyed from Mount Sinai to the border of Canaan. It had been their source of guidance through all those months so the fact that the ark was still in the camp as they set out should have been enough to stop them. Yet they chose to ignore what they knew to be God's will.

That outcome is an important one for us to recognize, as I am convinced that we, too, have times when we already know what God would have us do or not do. To be sure, there are moments when the path isn't clear and as individuals or as a community we seek God's help in discerning the best response. All of us face moments when the course of action isn't readily apparent, when we would welcome an appearance by that ancient ark to show us the path to take.

Yet there are these other times, when like the Israelites of long ago, we have no doubt as to what God wants from us. Sometimes that awareness comes from a clear understanding of what Scripture teaches. God's word—our own kind of ark if you will—is meant to be the starting point for guidance still and there is no better place to begin. Sometimes, though, our clarity as to God's intention comes from a more instinctive sense of right and wrong or the leading of God's spirit. Sometimes, it comes from guidance offered by friends or parents. We may not have the ark to go before us, but there are these moments we already know what we should do. In many occasions, we act upon those insights, too, and in so doing find confirmation later that we did the right thing. Yet unfortunately like those Israelites of old, there are moments for us when we know what is best and still do not follow that path, choosing to do something else.

The tale is offered, for instance, of a man who consulted his doctor. "I've been misbehaving, Doc, and my conscience is troubling me," he complained. "And you want something that will strengthen your willpower?" asked the physician. "Well, no," said the fellow. "I was thinking of something that would weaken my conscience." (*Bits 'n Pieces*, p. 21.)

We human beings have never lacked for a shortage of ways to disregard what we know to be the right course of action. We can resist God's guidance, we can explain away our failings, we can delude ourselves into thinking that the rules apply only to others or as a better choice, we can acknowledge that struggle and seek to grow.

Outside of Jesus there is arguably no person in the New Testament who had a better understanding of what God wanted than the Apostle Paul. A devout Jew, Paul knew the law of Moses well and fervently sought to follow it including a period of time when he actively persecuted Christians. After his dramatic conversion during an encounter with the risen Christ, Paul used the same fervor in the first missionary efforts of the church. Much of the New Testament contains either the accounts of those trips or his own letters. His words in many instances became part of Scripture itself yet he knew that difficulty in following God's will, too.

In his letter to the Romans, he once spoke about the importance of the law—God's word—and his own struggle to follow it perfectly. "I do not understand my own actions," he writes. "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." He goes on to describe the nature of that difficulty and then asks "Who will rescue me?" and soon answers his own question by declaring "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord!" (Romans 7:14-15,24-25.)

In many instances, we are not lacking for guidance or insight as to what we should do. Instead it becomes more a matter of choosing to trust what we know to be right; a response that can grow in frequency as we discover the impact of following such a path.

Sixteen years ago, a television news crew was in southern Florida filming the widespread destruction following Hurricane Andrew. In one scene, amidst all the devastation and debris, the camera shoed one house still on its foundation. The owner was cleaning up his front yard when a reporter approached. "Sir, why is your house the only one still standing?" the reporter asked "How did you manage to escape the severe damage of the hurricane?" "I built this house myself," the man replied. "I also built it according to the Florida state building code. When the

code called for 2x6 roof trusses, I used 2x6 roof trusses. I was told that a house built according to code could withstand a hurricane, I did and it did. I suppose no one else around here followed the code.” (*Leadership*, @1992, p. 49.)

Following God’s code does not mean all hurricanes will pass us by; that isn’t the promise of our faith. Following what we know to be God’s intention does not ensure that difficulties will only come to others either as sometimes doing God’s will means that for a period of time we face particular challenges. Yet if we knowingly act in ways that are contrary to what God would have us do, we should not be surprised if hardship or disappointment follows.

Which is why our call, too, is to travel with that ark, with God’s word, as completely as possible through all the journeys ahead. In those confusing moments when we do not know what we should do, but especially in those moments when we do.

* * * * *

John M. Willingham, Pastor
Doylestown Presbyterian Church
Doylestown, Pennsylvania
delivered this sermon on
Sunday, July 20, 2008