

“No Ifs, Ands, or Buts”

Exodus 14:10-18

Last in Sermon Series on “What If”

October 11, 2020

Pastor Andy Kinsey

“The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

- Exodus 14: 14

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, lead us and guide into the promises of your freedom: help to see clearly the glory of your kingdom and the purposes of your will. In Christ’s name, we pray: Amen.

Message

There is an old story that has made the rounds in churches many, many times, but it is worth telling again.

An eight-year old boy was reporting to his parents what he had learned in Sunday school. He told his mom and dad: “Boy that was exciting: Moses organized the people of Israel into a resistance group, and through careful planning, broke out of Egypt. They moved as quickly as possible toward Canaan, driving every kind of vehicle available: jeeps, tanks, sixteen wheelers – everything.

“But Pharaoh and his army refused to quit. They traced the Israelites with color radar, exploded missiles all around, jet planes flew in the sky. When Moses and the people reached the Red Sea, all seemed lost. The raging water was before them and the Egyptians were behind them. Suddenly, the Army Corps of Engineers came to the rescue by building a pontoon bridge over which all the people passed to freedom. Then, just as Pharaoh’s forces were about to do the same, the Hebrews blew up the bridge, saved all the people, and as a result, they lived happily ever after in the Promised Land. What a great story!”

Obviously, the parents were more than just a little concerned about their child’s overdone imagination. “Is that really what you learned this morning?” they asked. “Well, not exactly,” their son replied. “But if I told you what they told me, you’d never believe it!”

The Exodus

I do not want to assume that you have heard the Exodus in such a fashion, without any imaginative addition, but it is a story that has withstood the test of time, regardless of how we may embellish it.

The Exodus event is the paramount event in the Bible for the people of Israel. The crossing of the Red Sea is central to their identity, as God redeems them from the death clutch of Pharaoh.

For Christians, of course, the pivotal event is Easter, the resurrection of our Lord, who delivers us from sin and death.

Exodus...Easter...

Both events speak to the power of God to deliver humanity from bondage. Both events bear witness to what we call the “mighty acts of God’s salvation.” Both events proclaim the ways of God’s justice and hope. This is how God liberate us, and all of God’s creation. This is what God does! This is how God acts. This is who God is. *No ifs, ands, or buts!*

At the heart of God’s creative purposes is the notion of a God who is for us, revealing the way of freedom (Romans 8:29).

This is what Moses tells the people as they begin to dip their toes in the waters of the Red Sea. Moses says, “The Lord will fight for you...the Lord will accomplish this...” It is a verse the apostle Paul echoes in Romans that *if God is for us, then who can be against us* (Romans 8:29)?

Sermon Series on “If”

Throughout our series on that little word “if,” we have learned how, when combined with other words, like “what if,” or “as if,” or “even if,” or “if only,” the word “if” invites us to consider possibilities, to reflect on how we might respond to something or what we might do – or not do.

A few weeks ago, for example, we asked the question “What would have happened “if” Moses had not looked over at the burning bush?” Well, obviously, we would not be sharing about the exodus!

Last week, we asked about what would happen “if” we were united? The question assumes that we are not but that if we were, we could achieve more than we realize. The use of the word “if” points to possibilities, to alternatives.

The apostle Paul says as much in First Corinthians when he writes, “If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our faith is in vain” (15:17). The point, of course, is that Christ has been raised and therefore our faith is not in vain. There is another way. There is hope. It is a powerful little word: when combined with other words, the word “if” prompts us to think again.

Even when we use it the way we are today, we are using it to speak of what is undeniable about God’s acting on our behalf – *No ifs, ands, or buts!*

No Ifs, Ands, or Buts!

Perhaps you have heard this phrase before. It is an expression we often hear when we listen to someone who is certain of something, or who will not accept any excuses from the listener for not accomplishing a task.

For instance, when parents say to their children to clean up their rooms, *no ifs, ands, or buts!* – they are saying something to the effect that they will not entertain any arguments to the contrary. No excuses. No doubts. No complaining.

Or when a person in business says that “We are definitely going to lose jobs after the downturn, *no ifs, ands, or buts,*” that person is speaking with a strong hint of confidence. The situation is not good.

When putting together this sermon, I happened to learn that this phrase has its roots in Puritan preaching, going back to the late 1600s. One preacher spoke of “the benefits of God’s grace, overflowing and running,” *no ifs, ands, or buts,* as a way to assure listeners of God’s faithfulness – of God’s unquestioned reliability.

Regarding our passage today, we can only wonder if Moses had such a thought in mind, with the Red Sea was in front of him and Pharaoh behind him – between a rock and hard place. After all, what was he going to do? Where was God when he and the people needed God?

Of course, the temptation to return to Egypt is real. That is a possibility. The people even say so: They tell Moses in so many words: “Why have you brought us out here? Just when we need God’s grace to overflow, we find ourselves trapped!”

Liminal Situations

Perhaps they felt it was better to serve under Pharaoh than to experience the uncertainty of allowing God to lead them. After all, in Egypt, they had a routine to follow; there was a kind predictability. Not so now!

It is what many in the human sciences call a liminal situation. That is, they were in place that was between the old and the new, the familiar and the unfamiliar. They were “betwixt and between,” so to speak. We are not sure about what is ahead, but we are certain that we cannot go back. A liminal space. In this pandemic, we are finding ourselves in a liminal state, or in a place where we might fall prey to the temptation to go backward rather than forward.

Jameson Jones, a Methodist pastor in Indiana in the 1970s, spoke of this tendency in us as having a “Back to Egypt” committee in our souls – even in our churches. In other words, when we face situations of liminality, where we encounter a wilderness ahead of us, not fully knowing where God is leading us, we have the inclination to want to go back to Egypt: we long to return to what is safe, even if it was not a good place; it was what we knew. Back to Egypt.

Moses communicates to the people that they are not going back to Egypt; rather, God is going to lead them through the Sea. After all, this is what God has promised! It is what Moses tells the Israelites in so many words in one of the great passages in the Bible: “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance of the Lord. For the Egyptians you see now, you will not see again! The Lord is going to fight for you, if you only keep still” (Exodus 14:13-14).

There is a little bit of humor here, at least in the Hebrew anyway, as Moses says, “If only you will just keep quiet long enough, you are going to see what God can do.” A bit like a parent telling a child to be quiet.

God Is for Us

Sometimes we just need to be quiet, if we want to understand what God is doing! There is a confidence and an assurance that God is acting for justice and goodness. The Lord is working, even now. In times of trouble. Amidst all the challenges and chaos, amidst all our circumstances! *No ifs, ands, or buts!*

Those Red Sea moments we all have, when we realize that we cannot go back, and we find ourselves in fragile, if not fearful, situations. Betwixt and between! Even besides ourselves! Frustrated! In these moments, whose word will we believe – God’s or Pharaoh’s?

It is interesting that in this passage Pharaoh keeps changing his mind. Earlier, he changes his mind about if he will pursue or not pursue Moses (Exodus 14:5-6). One minute he is “on” the next he is “off.” Indeed, throughout the first part of the book of Exodus, Pharaoh does not know what to do, with Moses or the

people. Plagues come and go. Warning signs are everywhere, but Pharaoh does not listen. Only after the death of the first-born does Pharaoh wake up (Exodus 12:29).

But the Israelites are not always listening and trusting either (Exodus 14:11-12). They are just as stuck as Pharaoh is! After all, they want to go back to Egypt! So whom do you believe? Moses? Pharaoh? God? Whose your news source going to be?

Perhaps God's response to Moses can give us a clue about whom to believe when God says to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to go forward, and let me do the rest! (Exodus 14:15). And the people ask: That's it? Go forward? Into the sea? That's the news? Okay, Lord!

And Moses and the people trust what God says, and where there is no way, God provides a way! God reveals God's glory for all who have the eyes to see and ears to hear: In the struggle between good and evil, God's word is always going to be the last word. A reminder that the Pharaohs of this world will always end up at the bottom of the sea. God's Word remains, providing ways where there appear to be no ways. It is how God works because it is who God is!

Therefore, no matter what you may be facing. No matter where you find yourself. No matter who you are! No matter how you got here. There is a Word of Truth: There is a Reality in the world that speaks to hope, love, trust, justice, righteousness. There is One who is not only for us *and* with us, *but* One who has gone before us (Exodus 14:19-20), One who will lead us – *if* only we will listen and follow. The word of the Lord!

No ifs, ands, or buts about it!