

Pentecost Proper 18A
Peace, Seattle
September 10, 2017
Exodus 12:1-14

THE LIBERATING PATH

For tightrope walker Nik Wallenda nothing seems impossible—

- He crossed the Grand Canyon on a cable suspended 1,500 feet above the ground;
- And was the first in a century to complete a traverse over Niagara Falls.
- He's tightroped his way between Chicago skyscrapers while blindfolded; and holds a fistful of other Guinness World Records.

His mantra? Focus on one step at a time, and never give up.

Oh yes, murmuring prayers to Jesus while he's putting his life on the line helps, too.¹

According to Lan Alderman, the task of applying ancient texts to contemporary contexts shares something in common with walking a tightrope. One slip in either direction and the interpretation plunges into the abyss of meaninglessness on the one side, or misdirection on the other.²

There is a risk inherent in what we're about here every Sunday as we encounter God's word!

Sometimes the application of ancient story to contemporary world seems so readily apparent that the connections practically leap off the page. While other times the connection seems tentative or forced; a bridge too far.

Every interpretation carries the inherent possibility that we'll lose our balance.

So each week, it's a good discipline to ask the question:

What are the risks or dangers inherent in these particular texts before us?

For the past few weeks I've focused my sermon on the readings from Exodus, and that's where I want to begin again today.

Now, a lot of water has gone under the bridge since Moses encountered God at the burning bush last week.

- Moses leaves Midian and returns to Egypt to confront Pharaoh with the message:
LET MY PEOPLE GO!
- But Pharaoh not only ignores the message, he doubles down on what he demands from his Hebrew slaves. No longer will Egypt's overlords provide straw for making bricks at the factory. The slaves themselves must find their own straw, and still meet the brick quota, or face a beating.

What follows next is a high stakes competition between Moses and Pharaoh with signs and plagues of every description—frogs, flies, boils, blood—nine of them in a row, and still, Pharaoh, with his heart of stone, will not set Israel free.

As chapter 12 begins one more plague looms—and it will be the worst one of all:

Every first born in the land of Egypt will be struck down.

This is the context for our first reading, and it sets the stage for the first Passover.

¹ See article in Christianity Today: www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/june-web-only/walking-by-faith-across-grand-canyon-tightrope.html
Also, you can check out Nik Wallenda's website here: <http://nikwallenda.com/>

² E. Lane Alderman Jr. *Feasting on the Word*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010)

How will the people of Israel escape this plague? By following God's instructions and marking the lintels and doorposts of their homes with the blood of a lamb.

**WHEN I SEE THE BLOOD, SAYS THE LORD, I WILL PASS OVER YOU,
AND NO PLAGUE SHALL DESTROY YOU WHEN I STRIKE THE LAND OF EGYPT.** (Ex 12:13)

There are a lot of what we might call "technical instructions" embedded in today's reading. Stuff about what time of year the Passover is celebrated, and what kind of lamb one should use; the recipe for preparing it, and what should be done with the leftovers.

These instructions were added later as the Passover tradition was refined in subsequent centuries by Levitical priests who had an interest in putting the ceremony of Passover in good liturgical order.

Reading this text in its current form can remind us that rituals are important; that they provide us with an anchor—a safe harbor—in an ever-changing world. Rituals draw us back to our foundations and shape our shared common life and belief system from one generation to the next.³ This is as true for the sacramental tradition we celebrate as it is for the traditions marked by our spiritual ancestors.

But we should be careful, lest we confuse good order with the essential core of the tradition. In other words, in encountering this text it's important for us to ask the question:

What are the dangers as we cross this particular tightrope, and what must we do to keep our balance?

(1) One danger, it seems to me, is that in focusing on the performance aspect of rituals and sacraments our actions may become so automatic, so rote, that they lose their power for us; and we end up just "going through the motions." When that happens, these traditions lose their ability to transform us.

(2) A second, related danger is that we become so focused on technique, so dedicated to precisely following the rules, that we miss the core teaching of the story.

And the core of this story—the place where it breathes, where it lives, where the power resides—is in verses 11 & 12:

THIS IS HOW YOU SHALL EAT IT: YOUR LOINS GIRDED, YOUR SANDALS ON YOUR FEET, YOUR STAFF IN YOUR HAND; YOU SHALL EAT IT HURRIEDLY. IT IS THE PASSOVER OF THE LORD. FOR I WILL PASS THROUGH THE LAND AND STRIKE DOWN EVERY FIRSTBORN; ON ALL THE GODS OF EGYPT I WILL EXECUTE JUDGMENTS: I AM THE LORD.

These verses tell us SOMETHING POWERFUL IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN—GOD IS ABOUT TO ACT IN THE WORLD—FOR YOUR SAKE—AND YOU MUST BE ALERT AND READY WHEN THE MOMENT COMES.

Not only that; DRESS FOR THIS MEAL AS IF YOU EXPECT THE LORD'S INTERVENTION AT ANY MOMENT—FOR IT WILL COME, AND THERE ARE GRAVE CONSEQUENCES FOR NOT BEING READY.

(3) There's a third danger threatening our balance as we venture out with this text. It's the danger that we will fail to see this story as a story for our time; that we will fail to connect the suffering of God's captive people to the stories of suffering and liberation that are part of our world today.

³ Ibid.

Barbara Lundblad reminds us that when Jewish families gather nowadays to remember the exodus they lean forward as the youngest child at the table asks the question:

“Why is this night different from all other nights?”

This question is always in present tense. People gathered for the Seder not only remember the story; they are in the story. After thousands of years, they are once again in Egypt eating unleavened bread.⁴

Aware, then, of the dangers that attend our venture on the tightrope connecting this ancient story with our contemporary world, we are nonetheless willing to take the risk and step out—right? Alright.

So, what contemporary human experience, then, does this ancient story evoke in our time?

I cannot hear this Exodus story without thinking of the experience of refugees forced to flee their homes in places of violent conflict and disaster around the world—places like Syria, Nigeria, South Sudan, or the gang-plagued streets of Central American cities.

When there’s an opening, a ceasefire, a temporary lull in the violence, they flee. At a moment’s notice they leave everything behind—perhaps without even a chance to prepare food for their journey—if they even have food to prepare.

Instead of fleeing toward liberation these refugees flee toward uncertainty; the journey itself a tightrope walk through life-threatening conditions to reach camps where—if they survive—they may languish for years, even decades, before they’re given an opportunity for resettlement.

Is the story of Israel’s liberation from Pharaoh’s empire meant for these modern day captives, too? Where is the hope in this text for them?

For Israel the Exodus experience became the great symbol of God’s faithfulness in the face of impossible odds; the great proof that God was on their side. But, importantly, it never afforded them a right to gloat. In fact, quite the opposite. Their experience of being aliens once captive to slavery and then set free, became the social-ethical touchstone for how Israel was to treat its neighbors going forward.

Woven throughout the Torah are verses like these:

³³When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:34)

I wonder dear friends: By what means will God act in our time to bring liberation to captive people? Could it be that God intends the work of liberation in the 21st century—GOD’S WORK—to be accomplished principally by means of OUR HANDS?

We may be murmuring prayers to Jesus as we grapple with that question, but he is fairly shouting at us in return!

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR! CARE FOR THE LEAST, THE LAST AND THE LOST! FOR WHEN YOU DO IT TO THE LEAST OF THESE BROTHERS AND SISTERS YOU DO IT UNTO ME!

⁴ Barbara Lundblad, *Feasting on the Word*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010)

This is not new information. Are we not to consider the refugee our neighbor? Of course we are! We've understood this for generations, which is why the Lutheran community has been at the forefront of refugee resettlement for the past 70 years.

In our fragmented, contentious world, keeping those commitments is paramount.

As poet William Stafford writes, absent a caring community where we can know others and be known,
[quote] “a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.”⁵ [unquote]

There are many entities active in the world which seek to bend our minds toward their “truth”; toward how they would have us see the world and act in it—or not. Following God's call means remaining awake and vigilant about which voices we listen to and whose steps we follow.

Stafford ends his poem thus:⁶

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe —
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

When it comes to the “mutual life” we share as people of faith, as human beings, as Earthlings, Stafford's warning strikes deep. When so much is up for grabs, and the way is long, and our balance challenged; the routes into the future may look indeed like beelines into dark places.

But the hope which is ours through our crucified and risen Lord is that no matter how deep the chasm or endless the dark may seem, it cannot and will not thwart God's plan to redeem and heal all things. As Easter reveals: even the deepest darkness—death—could not eclipse the Light which burst from the empty tomb.

In a political climate where leaders advocate a “circle the wagons” mentality, it's incumbent on us to offer a counterpoint and to do so publicly. To keep going about God's Work with Our Hands. Our faith in the God of liberation demands it. Our trust in the Risen One compels it. And the Meal we're about to share—its roots sunk deep in the Passover tradition—celebrates it.

Amen.

⁵ “A Ritual to Read to Each Other” from *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*. Copyright © 1998 by William Stafford.

⁶ *Ibid.*