

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister
Sunday, August 9, 2015
Lessons: Exodus 6:1-9 and Matthew 9:35-38; 16:1-3

WAITING FOR GOSPEL

The Israelites are too discouraged, too beaten down, too broken in spirit to listen to Moses with his good news – his gospel – of their promised salvation from the degraded and bitter life of slavery. They cannot listen to good news, cannot rise to any new hope, cannot and will not risk caring let alone believing. Does Moses turn from his people in disgust? Does God take offense at their unbelief? No, and I hope we can appreciate the importance of that “No” for gospel – for good news from God to people who need it but may be too disheartened and perhaps embittered to receive it. Gospel is not life answers from people who have not really heard and felt the painful questions. People living in what feels like the absence of God need far better from us than happy talk about our many blessings.

God’s truth is vulnerable. It is the vulnerable truth of self-giving, healing, embracing love. Not mere sentiment. Certainly not approval, which would be a judgment without realistic appraisal. There is much in humanity that God cannot approve and much in you, in me, and in the churches that God cannot approve. The gospel is not the lie that I am just the greatest thing that ever happened for God. God does not think I am just wonderful and worthy to be affirmed loudly and proudly. I am thankful that God is not such a fool, because I know myself better than that. Psalm 139, presented beautifully in our special music this morning, reminds me often that God sees me far more clearly than I see myself, but – and here is gospel – God does not turn away from me in disgust.

When Jesus sees the crowds of unwashed, short-lived people of no account in the world, what does he feel? He feels compassion which means he allows himself to be drawn into their lives. He lets himself care about them, and so he enters into their shame, as his enemies are quick to point out. By associating himself with the harassed and helpless people, unqualified for respect by either the politically powerful or the religiously good, he becomes as they are – dirty with their filth, smelly with their odors, unrighteous with their casual breaking of commandments that offer them nothing in the way of hope.

Exodus shows us that God did the same for Israel. The Creator of the universe entered into the shame of enslavement and made sharing that shame the disclosure of divine truth. We get fooled when we follow the ancient pious practice of substituting the title “the LORD” for the divine name, Yahweh. The pharaoh, the king of Egypt, would never call this measly slave god “the Lord.” He speaks with contempt when he asks Moses and Aaron, “Who is this

Yahweh that I should listen to him?” Pharaoh is esteemed as a son of the gods, the high gods, the powerful and majestic ones. To him, a slaves’ god is nothing but heavenly filth clinging to the earthly filth of the most wretched of humanity. That’s how God comes into human history: through the servants’ entrance, as the no-account god of nobodies. Jesus came and still comes into our world the same way: through the servant’s entrance.

It is gospel, not that Jesus thinks we’re just wonderful, but that he never turns away from us in disgust. Sure, he gets angry, especially at the very religious and excruciatingly moral who dismiss the rest of us as sinful trash. A Presbyterian all my life, I must admit critically that our Calvinist heritage has pushed us too far toward declaring ourselves, often superficially, to be nothing better than sinful trash. It is true we cannot earn our salvation in Christ, cannot in any way deserve God’s love and mercy, and have no means for gaining God’s approval by being better than others, but that truth of our reliance upon God’s grace does not mean we are trash, does not mean God sees nothing in us to love, and does not mean our gospel must or should be degraded into the preaching and peddling of guilt.

True, we have guilt. It never entirely goes away. In retirement I find that even my dreams remind me, not of bad things I did, but of good things I failed to do when I had opportunity. Words, for example, I wish I had known enough, felt enough, and forgotten my own concerns and cared enough to have spoken when someone needed to hear them and I needed to say them. Words it is now too late to speak. We all have our share of guilt, but I contend to you this morning that guilt is not the predominant distress of current humanity here in North America. Many (my guess would be, most) young adults are not troubled so much by bad things they have done or good things they have left undone as by the deeply disturbing question of whether anything significant is worth attempting. *Why bother, and why let myself care too much? Is anything that requires commitment, effort, and sacrifice worth doing at all? Is anything true, anyone trustworthy? What does it all matter?*

What are people waiting for? When I was working on this sermon, I played a little game. “Waiting for . . .” What? Fill in the blank. I guessed one of the most common answers might be “payday” or for many, “check day.” Another, “Friday.” For school kids, the bell. Waiting for that bell to ring freedom. Years later, waiting for the pain pills to kick in. For someone to call. For Mr. or Ms. Right to come along. The baby to be born, or the baby to stop crying and fall asleep. For spring. Or death. Or life. I have borrowed this sermon’s title from a wonderful book[†] I have just read a second time: “Waiting for Gospel.” But what is that?

Gospel – the good news of and from Jesus the Christ – is not entertainment no matter how often or gleefully Jesus is named, is not diversion from our questions or griefs denying their validity and our pain, is not a neat set of truthy slogans about Jesus or God or the Spirit or how just great we are, is not cold and hard objective truth (love knows no such truth), and is never indifferent to you or me or the very real people in earth’s crowds.

Gospel is relational always because it is love's good news and always contextual as well, which means we must read the signs of our times. Jesus represents God and embodies God's truth to us in person for our living, human response. As with the Israelite slaves so with us in all times, places, and varied situations, God meets us where we are and as we are. As loving parents speak differently to their child in different circumstances – gently or more sternly as needed – so God's truth for us comes as needed in our present circumstances. That's what I mean by contextual. Moses did not go back to Egypt to tell the Israelites to be good, obedient slaves and wait for heaven when they died. We Christians have cheated ourselves and others out of gospel by making it all seem nothing but a guarantee of getting into heaven when we die. Jesus is far more concerned with getting heaven into us and our world, by which I mean making us responsive to God's love for us and all people and all creatures, here and now.

Gospel is not take-it-or-leave-it preaching at people. Jesus has entered into our humanity and shares it. To represent him in this world God loves, we – the sometimes graceful, sometimes bumbling communities of faith called churches – must enter into the neighborhoods and marketplaces, the streets and cities and villages of God's world of harassed and helpless people. We must enter, not as those in the know – the elite with the answers – but as people who care enough to listen to the questions, mourn the griefs, absorb the smells, get soiled with the dirt, share the laughter and tears, and step across the many barriers that block us from each other and from God.

Gospel is personal and social because human life is both, not one or the other. Life with Me alone on center stage is the very nature and definition of sin. Gospel is liberating and challenging, setting us free but thereby making us more responsible than we have ever been before. If we want to know the mind and heart of God, we must look to the least regarded, the least admired, the least successful among us. We will find Jesus with them.

Jesus represents to us the God who meets us where we are and as we are, not with disgust, but with understanding, compassion, and respect (which is much different from approval). Being love, God's truth is never settled and done, never to be sloganized or equated with doctrines, but is on-going and alive. Our questions matter. Our griefs and disappointments matter. This day matters because we matter to God here and now. All those other people matter to God as well, and so if we are to represent Christ to them as he represents God to us, then those other people must matter to us enough to make us vulnerable to them. For vulnerable, respectful love is the way of Christ, the way of gospel. Amen.

† Douglas John Hall, *Waiting for Gospel: an Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant "Establishment."* Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2012.