

May 4, 2014      “God With Us In Everything”      Exodus 14:1-9

I have mentioned this before. I am teaching myself a new hymn....an old hymn. “Hold To God’s Unchanging Hand”. The Hymn is based on a verse from the Psalms...Psalm 89:13. “Your arm is endowed with power. Your hand is strong. Your right hand, exalted.” The hymn was inspired by its author’s thinking about and praying over that verse. Here is the first verse of the hymn and the chorus. “Time is filled with transition. Naught of earth unmoved can stand. Build your hopes on things eternal. Hold to God’s unchanging hand.” The chorus underlines that last thought. “Hold to God’s unchanging hand. Hold to God’s unchanging hand. Built your hopes on things eternal. Hold to God’s unchanging hand.”

Here is my paraphrase of those words without all the repetition. The times are filled with change. World wide, for both nations and individuals, change is constantly happening. Because that is indeed uncomfortable, build your life on the eternal things. Hold to God’s unchanging hand. Put your hand in His. He, His love, His grace is the only constant. Gene McLelland’s “Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water, also comes to mind.

Over the next several weeks I am inviting you to walk with me through the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Exodus as I explore this theme, and I will probably insist at some point we

all take a crack at that old hymn. I have mentioned before that it was part of the musical score of the remake of the western "True Grit" starring Jeff Bridges in the role of Marshall Rooster J. Cogburn. I mention that again because I simply want you to know I didn't discover the hymn as part of a research project that centered on the things of the faith. I was seeking mindless entertainment...and suddenly there it was in the midst of constant transition.

We are continually asking the question Why? Why did that have to happen? Why me Lord? What have I ever done to deserve even one....that was Kris Kristopherson's big question as he found himself face to face with a real experience of the redeeming love of God in Jesus. Why this? Why that? Why me? Why now? Why terminal illness? We ask the why questions because the simple fact is we want to try and understand our current circumstances, whatever they may be. We have bought into a not necessarily correct idea, that life always makes sense.....or at least that it ought to. That we can work it out if we just puzzle long enough, assemble enough facts, get the details in the right order. The fact is life and faith, life lived and continuing, faith held and rock solid confront us with mystery, the mystery of our nature. The mystery of the nature of the Lord our God our redeemer and comforter.

One of the things I confess that has come out of years of serving God and His people, working in the church, and caring for people that have both feet planted in the modern world....all at the same time, sometimes understanding just proves elusive. Sometimes I feel confronted with the reality of what am I to make of that? And it is in such times when baffled or puzzled that it seems to me really wise,... to hold to God's unchanging hand in the midst of everything that is happening.

There is a theme that runs through reformed theology, the Bible raises the subject, does not necessarily explain it in every possible detail....predestination. That hovers through all of this. That God is involved in a majestic and redeeming way in all of what life serves up to us, that the parts we cannot understand may even be more significant than what we believe we do understand. The baffling parts of life...the death of a dear friend, the impending death of a member of the extended family, terminal illness, a sick child, seem to force me to my knees before God who is holy, whose purpose is redemptive, and whose presence is undeniable....to me at least. Does it seem like I am rambling?

Here is what we find in Exodus 14. The Lord directed Moses to change the direction of march of the Hebrews who were leaving Egypt and a lifetime and a legacy of captivity. To anyone in that throng of people it was obvious they had

changed direction. They were almost circling. You and I would be tempted to comment....they are lost. Great idea for a reality tv show. In fact God says to Moses, Pharoah will think the Israelites are wandering around in confusion, hemmed in by the desert. They are lost! And suddenly Pharoah is tempted by the idea of reconsidering the freeing of the Hebrew slaves. In fact says the Scripture, it is not Pharoah's idea at all. It is God whispering in his ear. It is God who is hardening the heart of the Pharoah and his advisers.

Their thinking is in transition. They are changing their minds. In the cool light of a new day they are suddenly fearful of what they have done. They have given in to the exhibition of power that has been presented by Moses. They have let the slaves go with a measure of the wealth of Egypt. Gold, jewellery, money. In the cold light of a new day who is going to do the work the slaves did? In the cold light of a new day, what is it going to cost to replace the workforce the slave population represented? Suddenly it feels like an empire is on its knees instead of its feet wielding a whip! The cry goes up, we have lost their services. Pharoah assembles his elite and most mobile strike force....600 of the best chariots. Lethal killing machines driven by men who know how to use them. And other troops on common chariots...the helicopters of their time.

And why would God be involved in this? God promised His people they would be set free. He has promised to take them to a land which will be their land. He has promised them a new life. He has promised to be with them, living in their midst. Why? Why not just let Hebrews go, unpursued, undisturbed? God says...here is the eternal plan....I will gain glory for myself through Pharoah and all the divisions and command structures of his army, and the Egyptians from Pharoah to the least of his citizens will know that I am the Lord. They will not fear Moses. They will not fear their former slaves. They will know what it is to know God, and they will be afraid. Revelation. The curtain is about to be drawn back that Egypt will discover what it means to raise their hand against God and His own.

The portion I read this morning goes on to describe what Pharoah ordered and had done that the Hebrews might be pursued and brought to heel. Imagine the terror in the Hebrew camps as they learn they are being pursued by this war machine. This is meant to be a shock and awe campaign. We may be sure there was shock, and that there was terror as they see themselves being overtaken near the sea near Pi Hahiroth opposite Baal Zephon. The Hebrews are not an army. They are in poor physical condition. They are malnourished. They are a mixture of generations, a defenseless civilian population that is about to be taught a lesson in the worst way. Terrified.

They don't know the Sea is going to part. They do not know that Egypt, one of the great Empires of antiquity is about to slip from the front pages of history to become a footnote. And perhaps what is even worse....had they been told, who would have believed? Egypt has lost its labour resource in the slave population that is following God as it follows Moses. Egypt is about to be stripped of her military might in one of the great disasters of ancient warfare. And the only explanation which history itself will find difficult to take seriously is, the God of the Hebrews is. I am that I am has touched you. The God who saves.

The era is suddenly one of swift transition. The wind of the storm is a wind of change. Nothing of earth unmoved can stand. The horse and rider will be thrown into the sea. The irresistible force of Egypt's military will be dissolved in a momentous miracle. Naught can stand. And at least for a moment, the insight of the slaves, safe on dry ground, having fled through the watery canyons of death on dry ground, will want to build their hopes on things eternal. For a moment everything will make sense provided you talk about God. His mercy. His power. His redemptive love. For a moment the only sensible thing to do....will be....to hold to God's unchanging hand.

Let us pray....

O God help us to grasp your hand and cling to you, and not to lean on our own understanding. We cherish the sense of being in control that comes with what we call understanding. You call us to believe. Not to be blind. But to believe you in our youth, in our middle years, when we are old and frail. We miss the part that we were always frail...and you were there all the time...Receive the praise of a people who believe, and help us when we are tempted to unbelief. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.