

Depending on God

Joyce Cordell

A recent road sign declared:

There are road trips... and there are pilgrimages.

We are embarking on a pilgrimage as a church. What is a pilgrimage versus a road trip?

A pilgrimage holds a greater meaning. It motivates us with specific objectives and leads us to a sacred place as in an act of devotion.

Many of our church members have served on committees this past year to study how we can best transition from where we *are* to where we *can* be with better ways of meeting the physical needs of our facility and our facility meeting the needs of the people. We long for greater spiritual depth for our members and ministry growth in our community. We have all been involved in sharing our thoughts and asking our questions.

But the important question is – “How is *God* leading us?”

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through Philistine country, though it was shorter... God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. Exodus 13:17, 18

In our Scripture, Pharaoh had finally let the people go, but what was next for these freed slaves? They hadn't been out of Goshen in over 400 years. Which direction should they go? They depended on Moses to lead them and Moses depended on God. He certainly had plenty of time during the season of plagues to practice his “dependence” skills.

Instead of going the short route, God led them on a route in which they would need to depend on him. Oh, the lessons they will learn! What lessons will the Lord teach us on our pilgrimage?

Reflect

- What thought stands out for you?
- How have you experienced God's leading in your life?
- What one thing will you do to listen to God as you prepare for this pilgrimage?
- Talk to God about it.

Pray

Father, help us develop our dependence skills and to remember how you have led in our past.

God Knows

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When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though it was the shortest. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle. Exodus 13:17-18

Notice the additional phrases in our Scripture today. "They went up out of Egypt armed for battle." While they were glad to be free of slavery, they had an understandable "fear of the unknown" and gathered up weapons.

What weapons did they have? Maybe bows and slings and a few borrowed spears from frustrated Egyptians who were glad to see them go after experiencing the ten plagues.

But God understood that these former slaves knew only brick and mortar and hard labor. They hadn't been trained for war. They had no shields, horses, or chariots. God knew they would turn and run right back to their slavery.

How often do we move forward thinking we have everything under control? We've picked up our weapons of defense ready to do battle, when we suddenly realize we have done all we know to do except the very first thing we *should* have done – take it to the Lord in prayer. He knows our fears and weaknesses; he knows the best direction.

Fortunately, Moses, their fearless leader, was listening and trusting as he sought God's guidance. Won't it be exciting to watch His plan evolve in our church?

Reflect

- What thought stands out for you?
- When have you experienced jumping ahead of God?
- If you made a sticky note to remind yourself for next time, what would you write on it?
- Talk to God about it.

Pray

Father, help us to listen, trusting that your way is best.

Trusting God with our Future

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Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, “God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.” Exodus 13:19

What do dead bones have to do with anything? The key phrase shows Joseph’s faith – “God will surely come to your aid.” Joseph knew the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and his father, Jacob. He trusted that a land was promised to them and it wasn’t Egypt! Joseph did his part in caring for his people through the time of famine, but he wanted his bones to dwell in that Promised Land even if he couldn’t be there in the flesh.

Even to the end, Joseph trusted God with the future and Moses honored that trust by remembering to take up the bones of this beloved ancestor as they exited Egypt.

Some of us have been at St. Matthews a short time. Others go back to the fire and were a part of the rebuilding of our sanctuary. You sacrificed to build this lovely, symbolic place of worship we enjoy today.

Before that, previous members had a vision for this church and put their lives and possessions into it so that many decades later we could participate in “loving and leading people into a growing relationship with Jesus” in this place.

So many aspects of Joseph’s life could be mentioned in the Hebrews “Hall of Fame” chapter. Surprisingly, we find his one verse is: ***By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.*** Hebrews 11:22

What trusting faith will we leave for future generations?

Reflect

- What thought stands out for you?
- What part of our building ministers to you?
- What special attitude will you have toward our church’s future?
- Talk to God.

Pray

Lord, help us to have the long view as we trust you with the future of our church.

God's Faithful Presence

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After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. Exodus 13:20

Our Israelite friends have now arrived at the edge of the desert. While Jacob and other ancestors had lived a nomadic existence, these Israelites had lived in the “best part of the land” in Goshen, but now the desert looms ahead of them. Everything about this exodus is new.

By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.

Exodus 13:21

We can only imagine what these two pillars looked like. A distinctive cloud, no doubt, and an extremely brilliant fire to light the way for so many. Exodus 12:37 tells us that 600,000 men were in this group. Moses could have been leading well over two million travelers when you include the women and children. Some days they evidently traveled on into the evening. The cloud and pillar of fire became their divine guide.

Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Exodus 13:22

Day and night God led them. He met their extreme needs with his sovereign presence. What an assurance for them. And what a vivid testimony to us.

We may sense His presence in circumstances or something a friend says to us. We may hear His voice through the words of Scripture or in that quiet time of meditation. While our needs may not be as dramatic and His signs to us may not be as spectacular, we can be assured His presence is still powerful and available to us in our day.

Reflect

- What thought stands out to you?
- How has the Lord revealed Himself to you in this past year?
- What will you do today to catch a glimpse of His glory?
- Talk to Him about it.

Pray

Lord, thank you for revealing yourself to us in the little things and in times of great need.

Be Still

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God gives instructions to Moses on where to move next. He informs Moses that the Israelites aren't through with Pharaoh yet for the Egyptian army will soon be coming. The Lord says:

“But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.” Exodus 14:4

Sure enough, Pharaoh gathers his hundreds of chariots and officers to begin pursuit of those confounded Israelites. As the army approaches, the Israelites look up and see them coming. Here they are up against the sea with nowhere to run. They are terrified and cry out to the Lord, but then... they turn on Moses.

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out to the desert to die? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die here in the desert.” Exodus 14:11-12

And so, the first session of whining begins. As we know, the whining and complaining continue throughout their journey. Patiently, Moses stands before them with assurances.

“Do not be afraid and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” Exodus 14:13-14

Ah, be still – one of the hardest things in the world for us to do. We must always be doing something, anything. Yet, “being still” helps us relinquish our will to His will. It quietens our soul. It clears our minds. It tempers our tempers. It is when God can affect our heart's desires.

Close your eyes, count slowly to 10, then be still and let Him move in your thoughts.

Reflect

- What thought stands out to you?
- What do you find yourself complaining about most?
- What would it take to discipline yourself to have quiet times?
- Talk to God about it.

Pray

Father, help us to be still daily so that we may hear your voice and watch your plan unfold.

Following Onward

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In our reading yesterday, Moses told the Israelites to be still. Now it is time for action!

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the waters so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.”

Exodus 14:15-16

Later in the passage, God reiterates what He said before, that what is about to happen will bring glory to Him. The Egyptians will know that He is the Lord. But as a prelude:

The pillar of cloud moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between them and the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so that neither went near the other all night long. Exodus 14:19-20

While the Egyptians are being held off, Moses obediently stretches out his hand. A strong east wind blows, parting the sea and drying the ground. Now comes the point of decision for the people. Thankfully, they follow God's direction and all night the thousands of Israelites walk through the path – even with a scary wall of water to their right and left.

The next morning the cloud is lifted and the Egyptian army storms across the land and into the dry path of the sea. The Israelites watch as the waters sweep over the horsemen and their chariots, drowning them all.

And when the Israelites saw the great power of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. Exodus 14:31

Lord, as we proceed through this month, may we listen to your voice, follow step by step, trust in faith, learn to be generous, and experience a reverent awe of what you will do in our midst.

Reflect

- What thought stands out to you?
- One emphasis this week has been to listen to God. How did the Lord speak to you?
- Another emphasis has been to follow. Like the Israelites, sometimes we are unsure, even critical complainers. Would you please pray through each phrase of the last paragraph in this lesson?

Pray

Lord, as we proceed through this month, may we listen to your voice, follow step by step, trust in faith, learn to be generous, and experience a reverent awe of what you will do in our midst.

Teacher's Guide for February 7

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If your class members read the suggested daily devotions, they will be well prepared for Sunday. If your class is like mine, some will be diligent and eat it up. They will come with many rich thoughts and experiences to share. Others will not have bothered in the least.

Some classes love to discuss, others just want to be spoon-fed. You know your class best. Those who are serious about studying God's Word and preparing for this journey with our church, will hopefully find this format interesting and helpful.

As our pastor has said, "While we intend the REIMAGINE campaign to help us fund capital projects, we don't want it to be about raising money as much as raising faith. If we could come out of it with a greater ability to listen to God, and a greater willingness to follow God, it would be a huge victory for us."

Plans for the lesson

1. Our main goal is an appeal to listen to God and follow. I suggest you assure your members, who are fretful, that we will not just be talking about money for four weeks. (As you read the devotions each day along with your class members, I think you will see what I mean.)
2. Write the six devotion titles on the board.
3. You may want to begin with a brief review of Exodus 13. Most are familiar with it, so just hit the high points.
4. Read the focal passage. (Ex. 13:17-21)
5. Briefly review the high points of chapter 14.
6. Use the devotion titles, pulling out one thought or question for discussion from each devotion. Discussion should be the bulk of the lesson for the day. It would be most effective if you can share your own personal example in one or two of these topics.
7. Let the class know that Pastor Greg's sermon today will reinforce what you are studying in these two chapters.
8. As you read this sentence, point to the titles you wrote on the board.

"In conclusion, we want to think about depending on God, realizing that God knows the plans He has for us. Therefore, we want to trust Him with our future. In order to be aware of God's faithful presence, we must be still which will help us in following onward!"