

“BRING UP THIS PEOPLE”

a sermon on Exodus 33:12-23, I Thessalonians 1:1-10, and Matthew 22:15-22
October 22, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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To understand the morning’s reading from the Exodus saga, we need to go back to the *previous* chapter, which is the story of the “golden calf,” when the people of Israel became fearful because of Moses’ “delay” up on the mountain . . . with God, where he was receiving “instruction” from God, including the ten commandments . . . and they convinced Aaron to make them an idol to worship.

They needed something more *familiar* than this “fire on the mountain” God. They needed something they could *touch* and maybe even *control*.

There is a very poignant scene recorded in the middle of the chapter, when Moses is coming down from the mountain, the two “tablets” of the law in his arms, and *discovers* what they are doing. It says that his “anger burned *hot*,” and he *smashed* the tablets on the ground. And then he took the golden calf, ground it down to powder, scattered on the water, and made the people *drink* it.

God, for His part, was so *irate* that He wanted to *wipe them out* completely, and build a new “nation” from just Moses and his offspring. But Moses “talked Him back” from that ledge, settling on a judgement of killing just those who *led* the effort, and then bringing a plague on the remaining Israelites. So although the judgment was *severe*, God did not completely *destroy* Israel, or *abandon* the people entirely.

But because He was *still* very angry at Israel for its sins (even after all of that), God then proposed to Moses that He send an *angel* to go before them – rather than doing so *personally* – as they continued their journey to the promised land, and as they engaged in battle with the various peoples that stood between where they *were*, and where they were *going*.

It is to *that* proposal that Moses again speaks passionately (and convincingly) to God in this morning’s reading.

And the crux of the matter is what Moses says in verse sixteen: “For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, *we shall be distinct*, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

What was *unique* about Israel, from the very start, was its people's faith in a God whose presence wasn't tied to a specific *place*, like "the gods of the land of Canaan," or Egypt, or Moab, or anywhere else, nor to a specific *medium* – like that gods of fire, or wind, or the sun, or the rain, or *gold*. Israel's God was the God of a *people* – a people of God's choosing, who had entered a covenant with Him to be their people.

That, to use Moses' own words, is what "distinguished" Israel from every other people on the face of the earth – that God was "with them" wherever they went.

The *first* part of that is the notion of "chosenness" – that God *chose* Israel. Not because they *deserved* it, Lord knows. They were *constantly* rebellious, and sinful, and short-sighted. And not because they were "special" in some way. They were no *different* than any other people. No, it was purely a matter of God's providence and grace. He chose them.

People of faith are emphatically *not* people of faith by their own choosing, or by virtue of any "privilege." Not because they "earned" it, or "deserved" it, or anything of the kind. They are people of faith because *God* chose them. Period.

And a person who *understands* that cannot help but begin to *live* as one who understands that faith is purely and completely a *gift* from God, leading to *humility*, and being filled you with thankfulness.

And nothing about that is limited to just Israel's experience in Old Testament times. Paul *begins* his letter to the Christian community in Thessalonica by saying, "we always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers . . . for we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has *chosen* you."

And then, beyond how the realization that we are "chosen by God" makes us *feel* – is what it causes us to *do*, and *why*.

At their best, Israel's sense of humility and gratitude to God for effecting their release from bondage was exceedingly *motivating*. When they believed (and sensed) that God was "with them," they were able to achieve victory in any undertaking, against incredible odds. Not because they were any bigger, or stronger, or smarter, or *better* than anyone else. But simply because they saw their lives more *in perspective* – understood (again, at their *best* – which they didn't always live out by any means) that they were part of something much bigger, and far *beyond* just themselves.

And that is also true in New Testament times. The Christian Churches in today's society – at least, in this country – are feeling pretty “disenfranchised” at this moment in time. We aren't the “players” we used to be in conversations about our nation's direction, or its policies.

As one example of how that is playing out, last week a Federal judge again struck down the notion of clergy housing allowances being “tax exempt.” That's a concept that comes from back when the Christian Church was a more integral part of our society, and when entering the service of the *Church* was viewed as not dissimilar to entering the service of our nation's military, and because of the sacrifices it entailed, it was a “calling” that was worthy of certain “benefits.”

Today, for all sorts of reasons (including the rise of mega-church pastors who make *millions* of dollars, and live lavishly with multiple homes and jets, and all the rest), while no one questions continuing the “housing allowance” provision for *military* personnel, support for giving such a tax break to *clergy* is waning.

This attitude of “disenfranchisement” was very evident at the national conference of Presbyterian Church leaders I attended last week in St. Louis. In his opening sermon, our Stated Clerk told a story from an old Western he had seen recently, in which twenty or so people were hold up in a barn, being assailed by a large gang of outlaws.

The “strategy” they adopted was simply to start making all the noise they possibly could.

In his words, “Those outside the barn began asking, ‘How many of them are there? Who are they? They sound like a rowdy bunch – we may not have enough manpower,’ The racket continued until the attackers decided they needed to go get reinforcements. While they were gone, those inside escaped.”

The message to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), he said, is clear: “If we make enough noise, no one will know that we've lost members. If we make enough noise, no one will know what we're going through in our internal struggles. If we make enough noise, those outside will begin to get interested. They'll be saying ‘I want to hang out with that rowdy bunch!’ . . . So, make some noise!”

Clearly, there was a time when our national church leaders were greater in number and influence, when they had many more resources available to them, and were much more likely to be *heard* by those in positions of authority or power in our land. And so I understand what they are feeling, and the challenges they face – constantly being asked to “do more with less,” just like the rest of us around the church, and even with “divided loyalties,” you might say – *enjoying* some of the

“vestiges” of the past, like tax breaks, while hearing words like Jesus’ response to the Pharisees to give to Caesar what is Caesars, and to God what is God’s – essentially, live peaceably with the powers that be, doing what they require, and focus instead on the reality that ultimately *everything* belongs to God.

But you know, the early Christians didn’t have *any* kind of influence or even “place” in their society. They didn’t have a department to “advocate” before Caesar. They didn’t have budgets for national programs. They just had their little communities. But in those communities, they did God’s Will. They took care of each other, they preached and evangelized, they studied, they worshiped. That was what God called them to do, and God *blessed* their efforts, and *built* the Christian Church.

I’m certainly not *against* our efforts – including at the denominational level - to make the world better – more just, more righteous, and doing so to the absolute best of our ability, and with all of the resources available. And I would note that at the same conference, the President of the Board of Pensions of our denomination pointed out that no matter what might be the case about our national numbers and trends, our members put well over a *billion* dollars into the offering plates of our churches in 2016, money that paid pastors, musicians, educators, and other church staff, took care of church buildings, supported mission and program, and helped those in need – both locally and globally.

In other words, he concluded, things aren’t nearly as bleak as some might perceive them to be.

But that said, in the final analysis it’s really not *about* how big or how influential we are. It’s about whether we truly believe that God has *chosen* us, and is *with* us. And in humility and thankfulness for those realities, trusting that God’s Will is being accomplished through us, no matter *what* are numbers are, or our “influence” is, or anything else.

The Israelites had success in their endeavors *when* they were being faithful – when they acknowledged their essential chosenness, and lived accordingly, doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God – being *hospitable*, and gracious, and recognizing that *everything* they had was a gift from God.

May that be our goal, and God be the glory. Amen.