

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Mighty Acts of God: Turning Toward God”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
September 24, 2017

Exodus 2:23-25; Matthew 20:1-16

They were everywhere. Everywhere we looked, there were piles of trash. Cindy I were in Houston this past week for my father’s 90th birthday. On our way to his house from the airport we passed rows and rows of houses with massive piles of trash out front. The piles were filled with wall-board, two-by-four studs, cabinets, mattresses and even kitchen sinks. As close as two blocks from my father’s house people were cleaning out all that had been damaged by Hurricane Harvey and the more than fifty inches of rain it had dropped on the Houston area. If there was a bright spot in all of this destruction, other than that many homes were not damaged, was the FEMA was present almost immediately after the rains stopped. While this may appear to be something that ought to happen, it did not always happen. It was in fact a lesson learned from Hurricane Katrina, where FEMA was caught flat-footed and unprepared to respond to that kind of a disaster. This time however FEMA had personnel and equipment in place to respond immediately. If you have that image of preparedness in your mind, I want you to transfer it to God, because this is the kind of God described in our Exodus lesson; one who is ready to respond when the need is present.

Though the language of the Exodus story appears to say otherwise, the original Hebrew tells us that God had everything in place, ready to go whenever the Hebrew people cried out. What I mean by that is that God has everything in place to act when people cry out. Let’s take a quick tour of this text. First, the language of forgetfulness and waiting, is in fact the language of being actively interested and engaged. God “*hears their groaning*”, should be translated God hears and responds. It is a hearing that leads to action. God “*remembers*” is not simply that God forgot but that God is motivated to act by the covenant promise. To remember is to set in motion what was promised in the covenant. God “*looked upon*” the Israelites, means that God is in motion moving toward them. God “*took notice of*” them means that God is willing to get into the muck of ordinary life with the people. These are all action words based on God’s long term commitments, or covenants, toward the Hebrew people. Even so, it still begs the questions of, why did God and why does God sometimes appear to wait?

I will answer that with a couple of questions to all of you. First, how many of you have ever given unasked for advice? How did that go for you? If your experience of that is similar to mine, the answer is not very well. Though we may have wonderful advice to offer, it is often not received well when someone has not asked for it. And in addition, it might not be well received even when people do ask for it, if it is not what they want to hear. Here is my second question. How many of you have been given advice for which you did not ask? The advice might have been about a bad financial decision, or brewing bad relationship. How did you respond to that? Probably not well. One of the ways to understand this dynamic comes from my favorite rabbi psychotherapist, the late Edwin Freedman. He once said that people can only hear you when they are coming toward you. What he means by this is, that only when someone is actively seeking our input, advice, and help will they at all be able to hear it and receive it. Only when we decide we need assistance will we take it.

This is where God was with the Hebrews. They had not been turned toward God. They were not interested in having God act before this moment. Unlike the slaves that were brought to the new world, who had been ripped from their homes and families, and so were constantly seeking God's help to survive and escape, the Hebrews had slowly evolved from being free people to slaves that were oppressed. Meaning that though they had been in slavery for hundreds of years, it had only become incrementally worse and worse, such that that they were never quite ready to cry out. It was only with a change in administration and the ensuing oppression that the people were ready to seek help. In a sense then, rather than God being on vacation from them, it was as if they had taken a vacation from God. And so only in this moment, this moment of desperation, were they ready to turn toward God and be open to the life-changing plan that God had in store for them. And they had to be ready not only to hear, but they had to be ready because what God in store for them was not going to be easy to do.

It was not going to be easy because the first thing that God had in store for them was that they would not be liberated in place. They were going to have to be uprooted from everything that had known and experienced for the last four-hundred years. It would require them to move from the only home they had every known to a new and unfamiliar land. As we will soon discover this was not an easy transition. In the wilderness, they would complain and ask Moses to take them back home...to slavery because it was more predictable way of life. To hear this, the people had to be ready. They had to be turned to God.

It was not going to be easy because the second thing that God had in store for them was that they were to become a new kind of people, living a new kind of life with a new set of laws and rules. This was because God had an assignment for them. God was not only going to bless them with freedom, with life and blessing if you will. But God was going to ask them to once again be the agents of life and blessings to the world. In other words, it could not be all about them. They were to be part of a larger world-transforming plan which would require them to do some hard work. To hear this, the people had to be ready. They had to be turned to God.

This story comes with a gift and a challenge. The gift of this story is the knowledge that God is always ready to act when God's power is required. The challenge of this story is that when we open ourselves to this seeking God, we better be ready because God will act not only on others, but God will ask a great deal of us.

What about us then? Are we open to God? Are we open to the God who is constantly prepared to bless us that we might be a blessing to the world? Are we willing to have God turn our lives upside down? Are we willing to have God call us to do things that we would not otherwise think ourselves capable of doing? Are we willing to leave the comfortableness of our lives and strike out in new directions? For you see this is what God is about. God is not in the fairy-God mother business of tossing about some pixie-dust so that everything magically becomes OK. God is about the life-changing, world-changing work of blessing; of kingdom building; of resurrection.

My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I opening myself to God in such a way that God can not only bless me, but use me as a blessing to the world?