

The Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church

“Just How Wide is God?”

by
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Perhaps, for you, lately, things have been going according to plan. You remembered what you went to the store for. Your team is doing great. The children are making Bs ... and a few As. Your beloved still loves you. The tests came back negative ... in a good way. The storm missed you and those you love. Decisions are clear; outcomes are good. Believing in and maybe even experiencing the presence of God is like breathing.

And yet, as most of us have learned by now, this moment is brief. The autumn equinox when the hours of light balance the hours of night, only lasts one day. And then the turning earth ... continues to tilt.

Perhaps, for you, lately, things have not gone according to plan. You got to the store and wondered not only why you came but if senior moment is becoming senior season. Your team did not accomplish what it set out to do. Your child lost their job ... again. Your beloved is gone ... and you wonder how you'll go on. The hurricane – and the earthquake – and the political turmoil – hit hard. Believing in and experiencing God may feel more like a memory than a real and present help in times of trouble.

I hope that in your life things are going according to plan. But for those other seasons – and we all know they do come again – well, then what? How do we get through them? What, and who, can help?

Last week, Susan Rogers led us through the songs of celebration, when the Israelites came through the Red sea with dry sandals ... though I confess the dead Egyptians and their sodden horses haunt me.

But now, we are through the liberation and into the wilderness. And did you notice the word complain comes up six times?

The Israelites complain that it would have been better to die with full bellies as slaves in Egypt than to die of hunger in the wilderness. Aaron and Moses say to the people, “What are we, that you are mad at us? It’s God you are mad at.”

What does God say? “I have heard,” God says. Echoes of what God first said to Moses. “I have heard the cries of my people.” Now God says, “I have heard your complaints. I will rain food down on you. Now. Do as I say. We will see if you will be faithful to my instructions.”

Okay. Let’s see what we can get from this story.

- 1) It’s all right to complain. In your prayers. God hears you.
- 2) It’s okay to have needs. And put them in your prayers. God hears you.
- 3) Even when you are not at your best, even when you are completely undone because you are in the wilderness, God sees you. And makes a way. Maybe not the one you thought. Maybe not the one you want.
- 4) It does not do much good, though, to blame your leaders – or give your leaders – what really belongs to God: what is due to God, or what is God’s responsibility.

Speaking of responsibility ... brings up an interesting question. What about when we do have a hand in the trouble we’re facing? Like the manager in the gospel of Luke.

What a strange story for Jesus to tell. A rich man hears that his manager has been squandering his property. Demands an accounting. Audits the manager’s books. And fires him on the spot.

You could say things are not going according to plan.

Just like that, the manager’s former life is ended. How will I live, he wonders. I can’t do manual labor ... I’m not strong enough. I won’t beg; too much shame.

What does he do? He starts cutting deals with the rich man’s debtors ... so they’ll owe him. So he’ll have a place to land when he falls.

The text tells us part of the rest of the story. “The rich man commends the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly.” The rich man got what he was owed; the people got a break from injustice; the manager lost his revenue stream, but gained a chance at a future ... by doing the right thing?

Or the wrong thing?

The right thing for the wrong reason? Or the wrong thing for the right reason?

Sometimes it's hard to tell. We would have to know how the story came out to know for sure.

I can tell you one thing I think he did right ... based on my own experience.

Fifteen years ago I was facing into a situation with this kind of life-altering impact. I had been married 20 years. Had two kids. Was pastoring a new church start in the Mennonite tradition, an anti-racist multicultural church ... and facing into the increasingly inescapable reality that I was gay.

Now ... it seemed to me that accepting that fact was going to cost me everything. Certainly my church. Definitely my marriage. Probably my economic well-being. Maybe even my kids.

All my choices looked wrong from some perspective. If I chose to do something wrong for a deeper right, the one we all have to become who God created us to be, would the right ever mend the wrong? Or would they just live alongside each other ...

And what about the cost? What about the broken promises? Could I undo so much on the possibility it could ultimately be life-giving for all of us?

As I began to live into this wilderness, I did what the dishonest manager did. I reached out to my community. I asked a friend to hold me accountable for how my actions affected my children. I asked another to help me be ethical in the choices I made in and about my marriage. I asked another to help me be fair to my future gay self. I asked my spiritual director to help me keep praying and hearing what God was saying. I found a counselor ... to help me become.

I did not tell everything to everyone ... but I did tell everything to someone, and I opened the gates between them.

I learned a lot in that season. Wilderness ethics, you might say.

- 1) Through any liberation, or disaster, or life change – especially with questions of right or wrong – we need accountability partners. People who know us and our situation, and have some power in our lives to speak words that matter.
- 2) There is a difference between privacy and secrecy. Best to err on the side of visibility while in the wilderness. We are hard to help if we can't be seen ... hard to save if we can't be found.
- 3) Speed kills. There is no goal worth attaining that can't be attained more slowly, if that enables greater accountability and care. Beware the temptation to hurry. Be suspicious of urgency.
- 4) Believe that God is trying to lead you. If you don't perceive that leading, well, review #3.

So. Four thoughts from Exodus. Four more from the unjust steward ... and me. Two more and we'll have ten!

Let me close with two assurances.

What has helped me to keep loving, when I am missing the mark, or when I am judging someone still in the middle of their story, is remembering that God – and only God – sees the beginning, middle and end of our stories. And that the mercy, grace, and love of this all-seeing God is big enough, deep enough, wide enough for all of us, and all our messes. That our God loves us for who we are, and who we might become, and so that we can love each other. No matter what.

Finally, let us remember that God is the one with the true riches. Like Moses and Aaron and the unjust steward, and your leaders and pastors, whoever they are, we are just middle managers. Our job, whether we are blessed with a little or a lot, is to remember that it all comes from God, and to keep it moving. Because whatever we have is not really ours. It's God's.

Our choices ultimately should prepare us, as Mel Williams said a couple of weeks ago, to pick up the near edge of some great problem, and act at some sacrifice to ourselves.

Because whoever is faithful in a little, is faithful also in much.

Amen.