



Catching Up with God

By

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First Lesson | Matthew 27:57-61

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who also was himself a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

Second Lesson | Numbers 10:29-36

Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses's father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which the Lord said, 'I will give it to you'; come with us, and we will treat you well, for the Lord has promised good to Israel." But he said to him, "I will not go, but I will go back to my own land and to my kindred." He said, "Do not leave us, for you know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you will serve as eyes for us. Moreover, if you go with us, whatever good the Lord does for us, the same we will do for you."

So they set out from the mount of the Lord three days' journey with the ark of the covenant of the Lord going before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them, the cloud of the Lord being over them by day when they set out from the camp.

Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, "Arise, O Lord, let your enemies be scattered and your foes flee before you."

And whenever it came to rest, he would say, "Return, O Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel."



Sermon

The Scriptural passage we just heard describes the start of a journey. After their dramatic rescue from Egyptian slavery, the Israelites had traveled by a circuitous route until they came to the base of Mount Sinai. While there, Moses ascended the mountain and received the Ten Commandments from God. The people waited below. Eventually, Moses returned, but due to misbehavior by the people had to go back for a second set of tablets. Yet after two years, two months, and twenty days at Sinai—the narrator is quite specific—they set out for Canaan,

the land God had promised to Abraham centuries earlier

Just before they depart, Moses goes to his father-in-law, a man referred to as Hobab in our passage. In other places, the father of Zipporah is called Jethro or Reuel, so it isn't clear if this is a third name for the same man or if the term "father-in-law" held a broader meaning of any male relative by marriage. In either case, Moses says to Hobab, "We are setting out for the place of which the Lord said, 'I will give it to you;' come with us, and we will treat you well." His father-in-law declines. Moses tries again, suggesting that Hobab's knowledge of the wilderness will be of great benefit to the nation in their travels. There is no answer this time, so we aren't sure if the father-in-law accompanies Moses or not, but the passage goes on to affirm another one who definitely does lead the people on their way. "So they set out from the mount of the Lord," the narrator continues, "with the ark of the covenant of the Lord going before them three days' journey to seek out a resting place for them."

The Ark of the Covenant was that ancient box or chest depicted on our bulletin

cover, which symbolized the presence of God. Popularized in American culture 25 years ago in that Indiana Jones movie, the ark contained the stone tablets upon which God had written the Ten Commandments. The book of Hebrews adds that it also held an urn of manna—the food God provided for them in the wilderness--and the staff or rod used by Aaron, Israel's first priest and Moses' brother. The importance of the ark, though, did not derive from the artifacts it carried, but its representation of God. So, as they set out, the ark—God—goes "before them three days' journey."

That image is especially fitting for this season of life at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. During this time of transition, you are not setting out for a new physical location but instead are engaged in an extended time of preparing for your next installed pastor. The survey that more than 300 of you have completed thus far for the Mission Study Task Force is a critical part of that journey. The input you provide is essential for shaping the document that will describe this congregation and what traits it seeks in the next pastor. If you haven't completed it yet, please do so today. The election of a Pastor

Nominating Committee sometime this fall will be the next key step

Those words from the book of Numbers speak to that present reality at 625 Montgomery Avenue, but I'd like for us to ponder its depiction of God's activity for other moments as well. God went ahead three days, and the people caught up. Once they had accomplished the purpose for that stop, God moved on. The pattern of God being three days ahead of the people did not end when the Israelites arrived at Canaan. For that matter, it wasn't even the most significant Biblical occasion of such timing.

Our first lesson recalls that moment. In a narrative we more typically read and ponder during Holy Week, it describes what happened at the end of a Friday long ago. "When it was evening," Matthew writes, "there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus." He goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Jesus, and when it is granted, Matthew concludes: "So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away."

The men were in hiding. It seemed to them as if evil had triumphed, that the words and deeds of Jesus had come to naught. Yet as we know, God had already planned the third day and the joy of Easter. It took that length of time for the people to understand, yet beginning with some women and then the eleven, they caught up with God once more.

That's the nature of our faith journey still. The Bible repeatedly affirms that God acts first and then humans respond. What that means from a theological standpoint is that every time we carry out the right choice, every time we act in a way that God approves, we are catching up with what our Creator seeks from us. So, when we forgive one who has hurt us or take steps to end an unhealthy relationship, we are catching up with God's intention. When we muster up the courage to move into a vocation that better matches our passion or when we decide to keep God first in our financial lives, even in the face of rising costs, we catch up with God's ongoing desire for us.

The Israelites were only three days behind God's work. The first followers of Jesus were only three days behind claiming the truth of an empty tomb.

Both are pretty good response times, but not the norm, as on an individual and collective basis, we human beings often take much longer.

It required eighty-seven years, for instance, after our nation declared its independence from British rule, before a Presidential document was issued which began the process of ending human slavery in this country. It was another ninety-one years before the U.S. Supreme Court declared that separate but unequal public schools were unconstitutional. It took the Presbyterian Church in America nearly 250 years before agreeing that God also calls women to be Ministers of Word and Sacrament. And it was only 10 years ago that our denomination's Book of Order permitted same-gender weddings to occur on church property or for Presbyterian ministers to officiate. All of those decisions were ones where we caught up with God. Our individual lives show the same pattern.

One day during my North Carolina pastorate, I decided to call a couple at whose wedding I had officiated a year earlier. Given the relationship formed during preparing for and then celebrating the big day, I wanted to see how things

were going. The husband answered the phone, and after I identified myself, he paused before greeting me warmly. I went on to say why I was calling. He turned to speak to his spouse, and we soon found a convenient time for me to drop by.

Days later, after I had settled myself onto their couch, the man thanked me for coming over and said there were a few issues in their marriage they wanted to discuss. I don't recall the details of what we went on to talk about, but I clearly remember what he said next. "I had been thinking about reaching out to you for several weeks," he went on, "but kept putting it off. So, when you called, I thought to myself, 'Okay, God, I get it! I don't know how that happened, but we are so glad you are here.'"

Not every phone call or visit involves God preparing the way, though I do wonder if those other moments when someone just pops into our consciousness are also occasions of divine nudging. Nor does every step we take mean that we are catching up with God's plan. Our faith teaches that God is present in all occasions, but our stories also include outcomes that God did not precede or choose.

Yet what our life experiences clearly demonstrate is the same quality revealed in both of our Scripture lessons: that God's work and human activity are meant to go hand-in-hand.

In writing about our passage from Numbers, one scholar says, "The mention of a human guide, Hobab, is balanced in the verse that follows by a reaffirmation of the role of the ark of the covenant and the cloud as instruments of divine guidance for Israel's journey... The welcoming of Hobab's voice and wisdom into Israel's community suggests the need for God's people to be open to hear and learn from voices that may not be part of their fellowship. Certainly, God's people derive primary guidance from the voice of God present in their midst. But in order to hear the full wisdom that God has built into all creation, we need to listen to the voice of others." (Olson, Dennis, "Numbers" Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996, p. 56)

Such a pattern is an intrinsic part of the life of faith.

Years ago, a magazine article by Tom Junod told of a visit between a teenage boy and Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian minister and host of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." The teen suffered from cerebral palsy and also had frequent outbursts of explosive anger. One of the few consistent pieces of consolation in his life was watching "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." I don't recall the circumstances that led to a meeting between the two, but the article talks about what happened when it did.

"At first," Junod said, "the boy was made very nervous by the thought that Mister Rogers was visiting him. He was so nervous, in fact, that when Mister Rogers did visit, [the boy] got mad at himself and began...hitting himself, and his mother had to take him to another room and talk to him. Mister Rogers didn't leave. He just waited patiently, and when the boy came back, Mister Rogers talked to him, and then he made his request. He said, 'I would like you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?' On his computer, the boy answered yes, of course, he would do anything for Mister Rogers, so then Mister Rogers said, 'I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?'"

“And now the boy didn’t know how to respond,” Junod wrote. “He was thunderstruck...because nobody had ever asked him for something like that, ever. The boy had always been prayed for. The boy had always been the object of prayer, and now he was being asked to pray for Mister Rogers, and although at first he didn’t know if he could do it, he said he would, he said he’d try, and ever since then he kept Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn’t talk about wanting to die anymore because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, and if Mister Rogers likes him, that must mean that God likes him, too.

Junod concludes, “As for Mister Rogers himself...he doesn’t look at the story the same way the boy did, or I did. In fact, when Mister Rogers first told me the story, I complimented him on being smart—for knowing that asking the boy for his prayers would make the boy feel better about himself—and Mister Rogers responded by looking at me first with puzzlement and then with surprise. ‘Oh heavens, no, Tom! I didn’t ask him for his prayer for him; I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because

I wanted his intercession.” (As quoted in Madigan, Tim “I’m Proud of You: My Friendship with Fred Rogers,” New York: Gotham Press, 2006, pp. 78-79)

How is God seeking to partner with you in a way that will make a lasting difference to another? Where are the places in your journey where God has gone out three days or more and is now waiting for you to arrive? Certainly, I can’t answer those questions in a definitive way yet, if you are pondering such matters, any one of your pastors would welcome the chance to be part of that discernment with you.

Yet what I can affirm without hesitation is that once again God has moved on ahead of you and me, which means that in some way, yet again, it’s time for us to catch up.

