

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent March 7, 2010

TEXTS: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

...Rev. Charles R. Exley

Stories tell us who we are. We can go through elaborate descriptions and definitions, scientific and cultural formulae, analyses in enough detail to fill pages of documentation, but it will always be the stories we remember. It's the stories we internalize. What is it you do when you write a letter to a friend or relative? You tell stories. You give the reader a serial update on the stories of which you and your family were a part. Oh, I know some of us like to write theoretical diatribes to put life into the most complex language we can find... but it's the stories that matter and the stories that stick with us.

That's why Paul begins the tenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians by saying, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea..." In other words – the unspoken part – if I'm going to get my point across, first I need to have you remember the stories we all know; the stories that remind us who we are and where we came from. That's our common ground. Then, once we've refreshed ourselves about the background, we'll get down to the matter of learning something new.

Actually, Paul has digressed for a chapter and a half to make this point. He has taken all that time in the letter to retell the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt. And, it will be in the context of that story - that retelling – when Paul offers a cautionary note about the current behavior of the Corinthian Christians and its impact on their future. We will learn from those who went before us. We will learn from their mistakes as well as their successes.

I'm not nearly so close to the ancestral story as those to whom Paul actually writes this letter. But, how can any of us not think back just as they did? I can't hear the word "exodus" without instantly recalling that which took place as Moses and the Hebrews escaped their slavery in Egypt. You have probably done exactly the same thing. So, think back with me to all those happenings that set the exodus story into motion: baby Moses is saved by Pharaoh's daughter as he floats down the river, set sail by his mother in hopes of saving her son. Moses becomes a trusted servant of Pharaoh, but while watching an Egyptian beating one of his Hebrew kinsmen, Moses kills the Egyptian.

Moses runs away to Midian. There he marries, has a family, and just happens to learn about the one God. His life is pretty good until that God decides to visit Moses in a burning bush. There God tells Moses that he is to free the Hebrews from their slavery; to lead them out of Egypt. You know about the confrontations with Pharaoh, the false promises and the threats, moving from one plague to the next. Finally, God promises to kill the firstborn of all creatures to get the point across; "let my people go!" When that happens, Pharaoh relents – sort of. The Hebrews flee but the Egyptian chariots chase them; chase them all the way to the sea. "Now what?" say the grumbling people who have already begun to complain seriously. "You've led us into a disaster of epic proportions! What are we supposed to do on this sandy beach?" "God will take care of it," Moses keeps saying. And, sure enough, the waters part – enabling the Hebrews to escape on dry land, only to have those walls of water collapse on the pursuing Egyptians.

That's exodus. When we hear the word, that's the mental image we see. That's exodus. God provided them with an exodus; a way out; an escape route from that which oppressed and enslaved them. Paul has created a template. With the retelling of this story, Paul has forced his listeners to see and experience – once more – an exodus orchestrated by God, just so Paul can remind them this is the way God works. God always provides an exodus.

In fact, this is the way Paul understood all of scripture. There were events and characters and examples and instructions and warnings – all built into the lives of God's people. And now, the Corinthians can look back to see and remember these characters and events, because they have a clear relevance to what is happening in Corinth. "Do not become idolaters as some of them did..." Paul reminds them, using sexual immorality as an illustration. Also, he says, "...do not complain as some of them did..." The Hebrews were world class complainers. And yet, Paul has so very carefully set the stage: "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so you may be able to endure it." The exodus. God provides an exodus.

Telling the story and creating the template is fine, but there is a point at which it almost sounds too simple. Things happen. Things that we could never anticipate happen. Remember those workers that were killed? You know, the eighteen of them who were building the tower of Siloam. It just collapsed. It was an accident; they had been doing just fine, making good progress. But, for some crazy reason, the thing just fell apart. They hadn't done anything wrong, it just happened – an industrial accident. Why? Was God mad? Were they being punished? Is there something about this story we don't know; something that brought this tragedy upon the workers?

Luke picks up on the same theme as that of Paul. But, Luke, in our gospel text, injects the unknown, the surprises as well. As hard as we try, as much as we listen, there will be surprises no one anticipated. And, they weren't even our fault... at least most of them! What then? How should we understand occurrences such as these? Yes, random things do occur – being at the wrong place at the wrong time. And, there is suffering that comes at the unpredictable hand of nature – not to mention the pain that comes from the hand of those who genuinely want to do evil. Does that mean that God has given up on us or decided that we had it coming?

But, the very fact that God provides those exodus escape routes should tell us that God's love is real. God does not cause or bring down tragedy upon us. Instead, God provides escape routes from the pain of that which we cannot control – an exodus from suffering to joy. It's always there; built in to the process of life itself. God is constantly setting us free from all that which works against us and brings us harm. We may not recognize God's escape route right away: who in the world would have thought that a sea would part in two? But it did, and God does... God does build into life the way to freedom.

The little parable that ends our gospel text today says a lot more than you might think to wrap up this thought. It's one of those nice little short parables that characterize God for us, but God adds an extra element that is not immediately apparent. The story tells of a man who planted a fig tree

in his garden. When he came looking for fruit he found none. The obvious next step would be to cut down the worthless thing, right? That's the way the same story is told in the ancient wisdom literature of Assyria. The great Assyrian sage Ahikar said it thus: "Up to this day hast thou been to me useless, in the future thou wilt not become useful." Jesus adds another piece to a story that would have been familiar to his hearers. The gardener, who is a metaphor for Jesus, adds to the tale: "Sir, let it alone for one more year... next year." An exodus; an escape route; a way forward to find the loving presence of God. It's an invitation to possibilities as radical as a parting sea.

I guess that's what you call a life filled with grace. Realizing the whole story makes me want to stick around for the outcome of a few more life stories. In fact, it almost makes me want to carry around a sign that first appeared in the window of a coat store in Nottingham, England. The sign read like this: "We have been established for over 100 years and have been pleasing and displeasing customers ever since. We have made money and lost money, suffered the effects of coal nationalization, coat rationing, government control and bad payers. We have been cursed and discussed, messed about, lied to, held up, robbed and swindled. The only reason we stay in business is to see what happens next." The story goes on!