

The Start of Something New: "Start Packing"

September 7, 2008

Year A: Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

Exodus 12:1-14 (NRSV)

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: **2**This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. **3**Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. **4**If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. **5**Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. **6**You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. **7**They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. **8**They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. **9**Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. **10**You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. **11**This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. **12**For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. **13**The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

14This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

As I read this passage my mind kept racing back to July 28, 2006. Does that date ring a bell for some of you? It was the day that the Forest Fire attacked the town. If you were hear you were probably doing something similar to what happened to my family. Now I'm not ashamed to admit the fact that I was in denial most of the day. As I watched the smoke, as I saw the planes, as I listened on the radio I was more concerned about our Camp Norwesca then I was of the fire south of town. You may remember that there was a fire in their area as well. Even though I was in denial I do remember them telling us on the radio that we should gather at least two pairs of clothes, some personal items, and gather up our pictures, and have them ready in a suit case.

I'll admit that my wife heeded their warning that day and had the suit cases out and got the clothes ready for herself, the girls, and had collected the pictures and she kept telling me that I should do the same. Well, I humored her – I thought – for I never thought we would need it.

¹¹This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD.

I remember it was about 8:05 in the evening and I was in the backyard with my daughters. I saw the smoke rising over the church all day but it had been black. This time that smoke was red and I told myself to run over to Shelton Street for I just had to see what was happening. When I looked down the street at the college I saw on top of the hill, the fire just coming over the Ridge. I ran immediately to the garage, opened the door, yelled into the house: “the fire’s coming over the hill, we’ve got to go.” I remember Sarah had the girl’s suit cases right by the door and I grabbed those and put them into the car. I ran inside grabbed a couple of things and put them on top of my stuff in my suit case, zipped it closed, we got into the car and we took off.

Now if Sarah had not been prepared we would have been in a heap of trouble for I certainly didn’t have that sense of urgency.

Today we start our Fall Sermon Series: *The Start of Something New*. As I mentioned last week this title comes from something I hear a lot in my house. It is the lead song from Disney’s *High School Musical* and if you’ve seen the movie like we have – some 534 times – you know it is a love story about two people who’s relationship starts something new. But it is not just about their new relationship, it is about how they change the dynamic of the school, how they overturn old stereotypes. They do all of this because this is the start of something new.

In the book of Exodus, God says to the people, this is the start of something new. Your horrible oppression, your slavery, your isolation, your second class citizenship, and more importantly your exile from your homeland will soon come to an end. But before we can go on some adventure, before we strike it out on something new, we must start packing. We must be ready.

There was a barber that thought that he should share his faith with his costumers more than he has been. So the next morning when the sun came up and the barber got out of bed he said, “Today I am going to witness to the first man that wants to get a shave.”

So when he opened shop the first man came in and said, “I want a shave.”

The barber said, “sure, just sit in the seat and I’ll be with you in a moment.” The barber went in the back and prayed a little prayer like this: “God, the first costumer came in and I’m hoping to witness to him. So give me the wisdom so I know what to say and the right things to say. Amen.”

So when the barber came out with his razor knife in one hand, he said, “Good morning sir. I have a question for you. . . Are you ready to die???”¹

¹ “Are you ready to die?” *Seth’s Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part I. 5.*

Are we ready to start something new? To start something different? To start something adventurous? The Hebrew people were. Listen here at 2:23-25: “After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” These people cried out to God saying, “we need some help.” Literally they were saying we need to get out of this Hell Hole. They were ready and God heard their cry.

You know I’m under the belief that we all want to try something new - try something different at times. I remember back about 10 years ago – summer of 1998 – I had to take a physical to get ready for my ordination into ministry. I had already been in seminary for a few years and that time was not kind on my waist line. At first I went through denial and my clothes just got tighter and tighter but then I gave up and broke down and bought bigger clothes. Can I get an AMEN! I remember that summer when I went to the physical I got onto the scale and the doctor saying “whoa! Seth! You need to loose some weight!” So I started new – I started jogging. I hate to run! But, why not try. They had this nice little path down at seminary and when I was home I ran south of our little town, but you know what happened. School started that fall and I got busy, I needed sleep, and after a few days and weeks I told my self I was out of shape and it would just hurt too much to start it up again. Occasionally I’d get out again but I was so inconsistent that I didn’t see any results and I figured I had better use of my time: more time with family, more time to devote on school work, and more time for the church.

Fast forward here about five years – 2003. Our health insurance was providing incentives for all clergy to take physicals and I didn’t mind. My knee was starting to bother me and I was a little curious as to how my blood work looked. That year at my physical I learned that my cholesterol was a bit high (my dad’s been battling that) and my knee – an old high school injury - came back because I was out of shape. Folks, up until that physical I knew I needed to change my exercise habits. I knew I needed to cut down on portion control. I knew I needed to quite with the snacks – the pop, the rich bread, and those candy bars that I would buy in bulk from Sam’s Club. I wanted to change. I knew it wasn’t healthy for my body, but that year my doctor instilled in me a sense of urgency and with that I tried something new. I changed my diet completely. I stuck with my exercise regime and I got down to a weight I hadn’t been since a freshman in college.

Folks, we all want to change. We all want to try something new. But give us a sense of urgency and I bet we’d start packing our bags. Have a doctor tell you to loose weight or be on medication the rest of your life – there’s urgency. Change your spending habits or have that repo man take your car – there’s urgency. Or maybe you’re worried about job security. In your sector it isn’t looking good. Maybe this is the time to look around some more or take more schooling. You don’t want to change until you have a sense of urgency to change.

Tony Campolo tells the story of a man he was counseling who had fell out of love with his wife. He advised the man to think of all the ways he could make life happier for his wife and then do them. A few days later he called to say how the change went.

“Every day I leave for work, put in a hard day, come home dirty and sweaty, stumble in the back door, go to the refrigerator, get something to drink, and then go into the rec room and watch television until supper time. After talking to you, I decided I would do better than that in the future. So yesterday, before I left for work, I showered and shaved and put on a clean shirt. On the way home I stopped at the florist and bought a bouquet of roses. Instead of going in the back door as I usually do, I went to the front door and rang the doorbell. My wife opened the door, took one look at me, and started to cry. When I asked her what was wrong she said, ‘It’s been a horrible day. First Billy broke his leg and had to have it put in a cast. I no sooner returned home from the hospital when your mother called and told me that she is coming to stay for three weeks. I tried to do the wash and the washing machine broke and there is water all over the basement. And to top it off you have to come home drunk!’”²

Now there is a case of urgent change. That man needed to change so much that when he did the shock was too much for his wife. Hopefully, when we have that sense of urgency it is not too late. That is why we need this scripture. One scholar describes this event as the Festival of Urgent Departure and it is celebrated every year. Listen to 13:3-10: “Moses said to the people, ‘Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten. Today, in the month of Abid, you are going out. When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory. You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.”

Every time the Passover is celebrated it is a reminder of an urgent departure. Can you imagine if we lived our lives with such urgency? When the doctor says change your eating habits, we do it. When the collection agent calls you just tell we’re on a budget now and this is all we can afford because we’re changing our life. When your kid comes up to you and says they’d like to spend more time with you, you clear away your schedule so you can be with them. And when God comes calling and notices that your lifestyle needs a little change, you recognize the urgency and pick up that good book, you start attending that Alpha Bible study, you recommit yourself to the Lord.

² Tony Campolo. *Illustrations Unlimited*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 1988.) 52.

Folks, our journey on this Start of Something New begins when we sense the urgency to change. It begins when we actually **do** what we keep talking about what we're going to **do**. And that's why we begin this journey with this scripture. This passage is about preparing ourselves for the urgency to move toward one goal – that is the Promised Land. For the Israelites it was home – no slavery, no abuse. But before they can start their adventure they've got to be ready. Their journey started with a sense of urgency. Folks, that's how we change, that is how we move toward our own Promised Land. In this sermon series, each Sunday, we will inch closer to our Promised Land. And it all starts today. Get those bags packed, be ready to move out, and sense the urgency to try something different.

In one of the popular Chicken Soup volumes, Dennis E. Mannering, tells about an assignment he once gave to a class he teaches for adults. He gave them the assignment to “go to someone you love, and tell them that you love them.”

At the beginning of the next class, one of the students began by saying, “I was angry with you last week when you gave us this assignment. I didn't feel I had anyone to say those words to. But as I began driving home my conscience started talking. Then I knew exactly who I needed to say ‘I love you’ to. Five years ago, my father and I had a vicious disagreement and never really resolved it. We avoided seeing each other unless we absolutely had to at family gatherings. We hardly spoke. So by the time I got home, I had convinced myself I was going to tell my father I loved him.

“Just making that decision seemed to lift a heavy load off my chest. At 5:30, I was at my parents' house ringing the doorbell, praying that Dad would answer the door. I was afraid if Mom answered, I would chicken out and tell her instead. But as luck would have it, Dad did answer the door. I didn't waste any time. I took one step in the door and said, ‘Dad, I just came over to tell you that I love you.’ It was as if a transformation came over my dad. Before my eyes his face softened, the wrinkles seemed to disappear and he began to cry. He reached out and hugged me and said, ‘I love you took, son, but I've never been able to say it.’

“But that's not even my point. Two days after that visit, my dad had a heart attack and is in the hospital. I don't even know if he'll make it. So my message to all of you is that: Don't wait to do thing you know need to be done. What if I had waited to tell my dad? Take the time to do what you need to do and do it now!”³

Folks, to reach the Promised Land we must start with a sense of urgency. Change won't happen without it. The Hebrew people didn't get to their Promised Land by being slowly nudged. They had a sense of urgency behind their moving. Folks, for us to reach our Promised Land, for us to start this journey to Something New, we must have our bags packed and ready to go. Amen.

³ Aaron D. Black. “Building the Faith Community.” (Lincoln, Nebraska: First United Methodist Church. September 5, 1999).