

The Start of Something New: "I Thought this Would be Easy"

October 19, 2008

Year A: Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

An Amish man momentarily stopped his farming to watch a new neighbor move in. Among the many items that came out of the delivery van were a deluxe refrigerator with built-in ice maker, a state-of-the-art stereo system with a compact disk drive, a remote-control television with VCR and a whirlpool hot tub.

The following day, the new resident was welcomed by the Amish man and his wife, who brought a gift of homemade bread. After the usual preliminary greeting and cordial conversation, the Amish man concluded with, "And if anything should go wrong with your appliances or equipment, don't hesitate to call me."

That's very generous of you," the new arrival interrupted. "Thank you!" "No problem," the Amish man replied, "I'll just tell you how to live without them."¹

Today's passage is the continuation of a journey. We have almost completed this path on the Start of Something New. This Fall we started this series with high expectations as we walked with our Hebrew brothers and sisters. We were there as they left their horrid conditions in Egypt. Energy was running high as we witnessed the defeat of Pharaoh's army and the knowledge that such an adversary was gone. Then energy ran low a bit as we marched through the dessert and we complained about the lack of food, the lack of water, and the lack of direction. However, with each struggle we knew that God was with us every single step.

Now we have turned a corner and our end is in sight. We can almost see the Promised Land. It is there. It is real. But like with everything in this series it's not going to be easy. First, we have to accept God's rules. Next, we are tempted by those old practices, but God is there to say no, that we must forget the old and go down a new path.

Folks, I realize I am simplifying these complex passages especially this text from last week. God doesn't just say, no! God is angry. God is incensed. The Hebrew people were tempted to follow a different path and the text says of God, "leave me alone and let my anger burn." Luckily for the people, Moses calms God down and convinces God not to kill them. That leads us to today's scene.

[Exodus 33:12-23 \(NRSV\)](#)

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' ¹³Now if I have

¹ Dan Safarik. "Amish man – live without them." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations. Part IV.* 9.

found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."

¹⁴He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

¹⁸Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."

¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." ²¹And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

What an interesting passage but to understand what is going on here we have to look at three things – 1) Moses needs God. He can't do it alone. He still needs God to get these sometimes difficult people to the Promised Land. And so in his unique way he tests God to see if God is still angry and Moses does this by saying, we need you.

2) Moses is asking for something that no mortal human being can have. He is asking for an understanding of God's mystery.

Finally, Moses realizes that nothing on this journey will ever be easy.

In the book *Unity of All Life*, there is the story of a man who sat brooding at his desk one evening after receiving his dismissal notice from a company he had served for more than 20 years. He was reflecting in despair on the difficulty of getting another job at his age, the impossible task of living on his limited income, and the shock of feeling that he was no longer needed, that he was useless, through, washed-up.

He noticed a spider on the desk and unconsciously brushed it off. Suddenly he was watching in awe as the tiny creature automatically spun a strand to bear its weight and swung gracefully to the floor. He began to wonder: If this tiny creature could get into the flow of a mysterious resource and deal so creatively with its crisis, then why could not he do the same? His thinking changed as his circumstances had changed. He might not get his job back, but he would most certainly move inexorable forward to something better.²

The journey will not be easy. One look at this passage and we get an understanding of this. This is one of my favorites. A truly visual masterpiece of the mystery of God. Now remember, Moses is up on that mountain a long time. He's talking with God. Now he really doesn't ever see God but Moses knows

² Safarik. "Spider helps man think positively about change." *Ibid.*, Part V. 30.

God's character, Moses knows what God wants through this interchange. Moses has this special, incredible relationship with God and now – in this passage - Moses asks for just a little more. He wants to see God's face – literally God's glory. Moses does this because he knows the Hebrew people need God. Moses makes this request because *he* needs God. Moses knows he can't take these "stiff-necked" people to the Promised Land alone. He needs assurance that God will be with them – give us your glory God – so that we know you are with us. Moses knows this journey has not been easy. These Hebrew people are not easy to work with and getting to the Promised Land alone really is not an option. So, Moses asks what no mortal human being should ever ask for – "God, can I see your face." Moses, in essence, wants a glimpse of God's mystery. Now here is the best part of the passage. Just listen: ¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." ²¹And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

God will walk by Moses, put out a hand and push Moses into the crevice of the rock, and when God has walked by, God will lift the hand, and all Moses will see is God's back. In essence – in just a brief, miniscule moment – Moses is given a glimpse – a sliver – of the mystery of God. Not all of it and definitely not for any length of time, but in a very brief moment, Moses glimpses not the face, not the glory, but the backside of God. It's a glimpse, but that's all. And we thought this journey to something new would be easy?

In ancient times, a king had a boulder placed on a roadway. Then he hid himself and watched to see if anyone would remove the huge rock. Some of the king's wealthiest merchants and courtiers came by and simply walked around it. Many loudly blamed the king for not keeping the roads clear, but none did anything about getting the big stone out of the way.

Then a peasant came along carrying a load of vegetables. On approaching the boulder, the peasant laid down his burden and tried to move the stone to the side of the road.

After much pushing and straining, he finally succeeded. As the peasant picked up his load of vegetables, he noticed a purse lying in the road where the boulder had been. The purse contained many gold coins and a note from the king indicating that the gold was for the person who removed the boulder from the roadway. The peasant had learned what many others never understand – the path may not be easy but every obstacle is an opportunity to improve oneself.³

Is there ever anything easy in this life? For some people they are on a continual search for that Easy Button we see in those Staples commercials. For

³ "Obstacle in our path." *Ibid., Part II.* 31.

others, searching for easy means avoiding conflict because it's just easier if we all just get along. We don't want to rock the boat because that is too hard. But just think how much energy is put into the practice of avoiding conflict all the time. And for some, easy means never venturing into something new. When we think of something new, it's unknown, it changes our existing way of life, and more importantly this new way of living might be – may be – harder.

Folks, this is a passage that says the journey of life is never easy. You never get your questions answered quite the way you want or need. Events don't turn out they way they are supposed to and frustration can build, especially when all we want is just to see God's glory – God's face. Now that is aggravating! Think about this, we've been on this journey for a long time and we've done everything God has asked. We've started something new. We've changed some significant things in our life, and all we want to do is just get to the Promised Land with God by our side. All we are asking is just a sign – a symbol – something, anything that we are in deed going in the right direction. You realize that the Hebrew people are a lot like us. We want the Hollywood experience – we want the bright light, we want the parting of the Sea, we want the thunder on command – stuff like that.

I remember there was a woman in one of the churches I served that was looking for something pretty much like that. One morning after church she stopped me on the stairwell and asked, "what happens when we keep asking God for a sign and we receive nothing?" I gave her several examples of how I noticed God. I told her how I experienced God. I said to her, "do you see God in any of that?" She said no and she began to cry. When I followed up with her at a later date I asked her if she had an opportunity to think of our conversation and she told me, "I just buried it deep within myself so I won't have to deal with it."

This woman wanted a sign from God. She wanted something easy that she could reach out and literally know the divine. It reminds me of a popular story that my kids like me to retell.

The man whispered, "God, speak to me" and a meadowlark sang. But, the man did not hear. So the man yelled, "God, speak to me!" And, the thunder rolled across the sky. But, the man did not listen.

The man looked around and said, "God let me see you." And a star shined brightly. But the man did not notice. And, the man shouted, "God show me a miracle!" And, a life was born. But, the man did not know.

So, the man cried out in despair, "Touch me God, and let me know you are there!" Whereupon, God reached down and touched the man. But, the man brushed the butterfly away and walked on.⁴

Folks, I know life isn't easy and sometimes when we need a simple direction in life it seems we are not getting it. We almost want to reach out and touch God's divine and know – absolutely know – we are doing the right thing. But look at something interesting here. It is the heart of this passage: ¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you

⁴ "Man doesn't see God." *Ibid.*, Part IV. 12.

the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

God says, "you can't see my face but when you need me I'll be there. All of my goodness will be with you." When the journey gets harder, when you feel like giving up, when you feel like you've had enough, when you have those gut moments, God says, "that's when you'll know, that's when you feel my presence."

And that is the mystery of life. I don't think any of us with 100% certainty will ever understand the mystery of God. But I don't think we need to. We just need to understand God's goodness. That I believe is easy enough.

There is a beautiful piece floating around the internet supposedly written by an 8-year-old child. I couldn't find any evidence that it wasn't, however, it is a wonderful piece attempting to explain the mystery and goodness of God.

This was written by an 8 year old, from Chula Vista, California, for his third grade homework assignment. The assignment was to explain God.

One of God's main jobs is making people. He makes them to replace the ones that die, so there will be enough people to take care of things on earth. He doesn't make grown-ups, just babies. I think because they are smaller and easier to make. That way He doesn't have to take up His valuable time teaching them to talk and walk. He can just leave that to mothers and fathers.

God's second most important job is listening to prayers. An awful lot of this goes on, since some people, like preachers and things, pray at times beside bedtime. God doesn't have time to listen to the radio or TV because of this. Because He hears everything, there must be a terrible lot of noise in His ears, unless He has thought of a way to turn it off. God sees everything and hears everything and is everywhere which keeps Him pretty busy. So you shouldn't go wasting His time by going over your Mom and dad's head asking for something they said you couldn't have.

Atheists are people who don't believe in God. I don't think there are any in Chula Vista. At least there aren't any who come to our church. Jesus is God's Son. He used to do all the hard work like walking on water and performing miracles and trying to teach the people who didn't want to learn about God. They finally got tired of Him preaching to them and they crucified Him. But He was good and kind, like His Father and He told His Father that they didn't know what they were doing and to forgive them and God said OK. His Dad (God) appreciated everything that He had done and all His hard work on earth so He told Him He didn't have to go out on the road anymore. He could stay in heaven. So He did.

And now He helps His Dad out by listening to prayers and seeing things which are important for God to take care of and which ones He can take care of Himself without having to bother God. Like a secretary, only more important. You can pray anytime you want and they are sure to help you because they got it worked out so one of them is on duty all the time.

You should always go to church on Sunday because it makes God happy, and if there's anybody you want to make happy, it's God. Don't skip church to do

something you think will be more fun like going to the beach. This is wrong. And besides the sun doesn't come out at the beach until noon anyway.

If you don't believe in God, besides being an atheist, you will be very lonely, because your parents can't go everywhere with you, like to camp, but God can. It is good to know He's around you when you're scared in the dark or when you can't swim and you get thrown into real deep water by big kids.

But . . . you shouldn't just always think of what God can do for you. I figure God put me here and He can take me back anytime He pleases.

And . . . that's why I believe in God.⁵

Why do we believe in God, because even though life is hard, we need God to get us through those hard times. Even though life is not easy, we need God to make them smoother. Even though life can be difficult, we can not imagine life without God. Amen.

⁵ Danny Dutton. "Explaining God." *Ibid.*, Part III. 4.