

Liberating Love: Practicing the Presence of God

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32

Exodus 17:1-7 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Philippians 2:3-7 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Matthew 21:28-32 *Jesus knows he is nearing the end of his earthly journey. He has again predicted his death at the hands of the powers that be. He enters Jerusalem to cheers from the common folk, and, in righteous indignation, drives from the temple unscrupulous merchants who prey on poor people. At the same time, he continues his ministry of healing. When the temple elite leaders question his authority to do all these things, he doesn't answer directly but poses this parable:*

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

Close your eyes for a minute and think about how many times you turned on a tap or otherwise used water today: Did you make a cup of coffee? Wash a breakfast dish? Shower? Brush your teeth? Fill your dog or cat's water dish? How many times was water there for you without question? Then think of the Israelites in the wilderness. They had no water for drinking, bathing, cooking, or for their animals. No wonder they got anxious. At God's command, Moses struck the rock and provided water for all these things. Last week God tested them, a trust test: Would they trust God to provide? Apparently not! This week they test God: Are you really with us or not? The water that flowed from the rock was like a river of healing, a river of peace, a sign of God's presence. God was with them in ways they could touch, taste, drink, even play in!

Because water was scarce, when it came, the miracle showed them that God was there. Because clean water is instantly available for us, do we forget what a miracle it is? Next time you turn on the tap, remember, God's in the water. Practice the presence of God.

These days, it's easy for me to get lost in endless dire news stories. Some days that's easier than losing myself in the beauty of the earth, or the uplifting power of music, or the peace that comes in prayer. It's easy to wonder where God is in the news when it all seems bad! But there's one word in particular I've been hearing a lot that baffles me: "unprecedented." Everything is unprecedented. Really? It reminds me of the old joke about "original sin." No, it doesn't exist. Everything's been done, nothing original about it. Nothing's unprecedented.

Are we disappointed in our leaders? The Israelites were so over the wilderness wandering they were ready to stone Moses! Are we disappointed in certain people who profess the same faith as we do but nevertheless seem to get it all wrong? So was Moses, who yelled at God: "What am I supposed to do with these people?"

Are we disappointed in family members who've let us down? Think of the father in Jesus' parable, and the son who promised and never delivered. But think again of the son who refused and then came through! We can always hope!

Today, are fears about the election really unprecedented? Are we anxious about voting safely this fall, and whether our vote will be counted? That's nothing our indigenous and Black brothers and sisters haven't lived with since forever.

After 9/11/2001, Cornel West pointed out, "Never before have [*all*] Americans ... felt unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated. Yet to have been [Black] in America for over 350 years has been to feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated."¹ Those feelings are not unprecedented; they're just unprecedented for the affluent white majority, unprecedented for people who look like me. For generations, violence of all kinds was inflicted on Black, indigenous, people of color, queer, and transgender folks while mainstream society

¹ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (2004), p. 20.

remained silent and perpetrators went unpunished, or even boasted about their exploits. Now, we like to say, “I’m OK with protests, but those riots are too much.” What changed? There’s nothing new about violence. But some people threaten that will invade spaces we like to call safe: they mean places where white people live.

But what about the pandemic? What about the neverending wars? We know those aren’t new. Can we learn from someone who lived through worse? But let me tell you a story about a man known as Brother Lawrence. He lived during the 30 Years War in Europe; it lasted from 1618-1648. The war ravaged the countryside and spread famine and disease - oh, and did I mention, it was based on religious disagreements among Christians? Between 25 and 40% of the population perished; in some towns, as many as 3 out of 4 people died. Brother Lawrence was four years old when the war began. To escape starvation, he became a soldier when he was only 17. He was wounded, and disabled for the rest of his life. At age 26, he joined a monastery as a lay brother, working in the kitchen or making sandals because he had little education. He’s called “the kitchen saint.” His wisdom attracted people far more learned than himself. Despite the horrors he’d endured, this is what he taught: “Practice the presence of God in all things.” He is possibly most famous for saying, “Lord of all pots and pans and things, make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!”

Clearly, housework is one thing that has abundant precedent! But the fear that God’s gone AWOL in the midst of hard things happening has precedent, too. The truth is, no matter what we feel about it, God never is far. God is there as much in the washing up of the dinner dishes as in the enjoyment of the dinner, as much in times of drudgery as times of joy. God’s eternal presence is what I hope we remember today. Practice it in something even more constant than water: your breath. Have you ever noticed, the way we breathe is a barometer of our emotional state? I find myself holding my breath when I’m fearful, I breathe fast, hard, shallow breaths when I’m mad. But when I sleep or pray, my breath deepens, slows down. I take it easy, literally.

With every conscious breath, you can remember the presence of God. You can open yourself to God’s way of seeing, and Jesus’ way of being. What does that look like? Paul said it in Philippians: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” The “others” for us today are not those in power, but those who have been denied power and voice in our society. As you may know, I’ve embarked on the Presbytery’s Spiritual Pilgrimage toward Anti-racism. The first thing I’m learning is to trust the truth of my sisters and brothers of color. They are my teachers, and my leaders; and it takes some humility to listen deeply, with my heart as well as my mind, to remain open, without getting defensive.

Paul goes on: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Jesus was conceived and nourished in a woman’s womb, receiving food and oxygen through her body. We can invite God into us in the same way.

When you are fearful, angry, disappointed, troubled, sad, frustrated, remember, you are not the first to feel that way. These times are not unprecedented. There's precedent, too, for rising above hard times and difficult feelings, finding a higher plane. We can practice the presence of God in our working, in our walking, in our waking, in our sleeping. I know this, that:

God cannot abide with us in a place of fear, so practice confidence and trust.

God cannot abide with us in a place of ill will or hatred, so practice understanding and love.

God cannot abide with us in an endless flow of online scare tactics, so try an internet diet.

God cannot speak inside of angry noise and conscious deceits, so practice quiet truth.

God cannot be born except in a womb of Love, so offer God that womb.²

Invite God in with every breath. Practice the presence of God. I guarantee, you'll feel better.

Take a moment now to do so. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers:

God of pots and pans and plumbing, of brooms and lawnmowers and computers, of all the tools that we take for granted, let us welcome you with every breath and feel your presence in every simple task. Teach us to care without losing ourselves in cares.

God of this time and of all time, forgive us for believing we are the first to feel anxiety and uncertainty, to believe we live in unprecedented times. Remind us that, as you were there for Moses and the Israelites, so you are faithfully with us. Teach us humility, teach us to listen and learn from those who have passed this way already. Hear the prayers of those who suffer far more than we do, from ills we can name but not truly understand. And bless the work of all who strive for a better world through love and patient persistence.

Merciful healer, tend the pain and wounds and illness, the sorrow and loneliness of your children, especially those already named, and others dear to us. May we also celebrate with those who celebrate, and rejoice with those who rejoice - as we see great and small ways that your kingdom is coming among us. And so we pray with Jesus, who taught us of that kingdom, "Our Father, who art in heaven,..."

² Adapted from Richard Rohr, "Some simple but urgent guidance to get us through these next months." Online, September 21, 2020.

Her Head

Near Ekuvukeni,
in Natal, South Africa,
a woman carries water on her head.
After a year of drought,
when one child in three is at risk of death,
she returns from a distant well,
carrying water on her head.

The pumpkins are gone,
the tomatoes withered,
yet the woman carries water on her head.
The cattle kraals are empty,
the goats gaunt-
no milk now for children,
but she is carrying water on her head.

The engineers have reversed the river:
those with power can keep their power,
but one woman is carrying water on her head.
In the homelands, where the dusty crowds
watch the empty roads for water trucks,
one woman trusts herself with treasure,
and carries water on her head.

The sun does not dissuade her,
not the dried earth that blows against her,
as she carries the water on her head.
In a huge and dirty pail,
with an idle handle,
resting on a narrow can,
this woman is carrying water on her head.

This woman, who girds her neck
with safety pins, this one
who carries water on her head,
trusts her own head to bring to her people
what they need now
between life and death:
She is carrying them water on her head.

~ Joan Murray ~

(Looking for the Parade)