

Southport Presbyterian Church
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Led by the Light
Exodus 13:17-22

Who or what leads you to make the decisions of your life? In the midst of the wilderness in which we often find ourselves, from what source does your guidance come?

Consider two old friends who met one day after many years. One had attended college and now was very successful. The other had not attended college and never had much ambition, yet he still seemed to be doing well.

Curious as to why, the college graduate asked his friend, "How has everything been going with you?"

The less-educated, less ambitious man replied, "Well, one day I opened my Bible at random, and dropped my finger on a page. The word under my finger was *oil*. So, I invested in oil, and boy did the oil wells gush. Then I tried the method again, and my finger stopped on the word *gold*. So, I invested in gold, and those mines really produced. Now I'm as rich as Rockefeller."

The successful friend was so impressed that he rushed to his hotel, grabbed a Gideon Bible, flipped it open, and dropped his finger on a page. When he opened his eyes, he saw that his finger rested on the words, "Chapter Eleven."

While God can use any method He wants to lead us, I would not recommend using the Bible in the manner described above to make the important decisions of your life. Instead, we are led by God as we prayerfully read passages which show how God led His people in the past. We find important principles or truths that help us see how God wants to lead us in the world of today.

As we begin the season of Advent, when we look forward to the celebration of the coming of God's long-expected Son, Jesus, into our world, we are going to look back on a crucial moment in the history of His chosen people, Israel. In a uniquely special way, they are led by the Light which God provides for them.

Let's look together at Exodus 13:17-22, and then see how God has provided another Light to lead us in the darkest of nights.

In the chapters preceding the passage I will read, God had called the unwilling, yet best prepared, Moses, to lead His people out of Egyptian slavery. God used the miraculous events of disaster, which we call, "the plagues," to convince the Egyptian Pharaoh that it was time to release the Hebrews from their bondage
Read- Exodus 13:17-22

In the midst of one of the greatest events of her history, Israel is led by the light.

Please note that Israel, as she leaves Egypt behind, is in a very vulnerable state. For the past 400 hundred years, the Hebrew people have served as slaves being led by the Egyptian Pharaohs. While they had multiplied so that they numbered more than 600,000 men plus women and children, according to Exodus 12:37, they were very vulnerable.

While our passage says that they were “armed for battle,” most scholars would say that they were divided into orderly ranks, but were anything but ready for battle. They had been slaves and not soldiers. Viewing themselves as slaves made them vulnerable.

While the shortest distance to the Promised Land would have been traveling north to the Mediterranean through the Philistine territory, they would have been easy prey for the enemies. The Egyptians could have quickly stopped them with the fortifications they had along that path. Even if they had defeated the Egyptians, they would have met other foes who could have trounced them in battle.

Their greatest foe, however, would have been themselves. God, who knew them better than they knew themselves, was certain that in the heat of any battle, they would have turned around and retreated back to Egypt. This saying makes sense, “You could take the people out of Egypt, but you couldn’t take Egypt out of the people.” They had a slave mentality.

Understanding all of this, God led them on a desert road toward the Red Sea, which they would cross on dry with the Egyptians in hot pursuit. Then they would travel down to Mt. Sinai the place where Moses had experienced the “burning bush.” There on Sinai God would give them the Law.

Paying great attention to detail, Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, keeping the covenant that had been made with the sons of Jacob. Joseph knew that Egypt was not the place where Israel belonged. Someday, she would return to her homeland. The container carrying the bones of Joseph was a constant reminder for the people of how God had led and delivered them in the past.

As the Hebrew people moved to the edge of the desert, the Lord goes before them into that unknown place. They are led by God into the desert by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to give them light for the journey. Those two wonderful demonstrations of God’s presence with them never “left its place in front of the people.”

Wow! Continually, God was out in front of them leading them into their future by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. In the midst of their greatest vulnerability and deepest darkness, they were led by the light.

Today, we are led by the light.

In this Advent season, as we see more and more lights all around, let them be a reminder to you that we are led by the Light. A star lit up the dark night sky to herald the birth of the One who would call himself “the Light of the world.”

In this wonderful season, it is crucial for us to look back on the past, see how God has led His people, and believe that He still leads us today. Exodus 13 gives us three very special truths we can trust and follow.

We can believe that God knows us and our vulnerabilities even more than we do. Even though we might not understand it at the time, He wants to lead us on a path that is just right for each of us. Do you believe that?

We can only see the past and present dimensions and can’t know what the future hold. Just as was true for the Israelites at the time of the Exodus. The God, who understood them and knew their future, led them, in the way that was best for them.

The same thing was true for Henri Durant, a wealthy 19th century Swiss banker who went to Paris to do business with Napoleon. Going to the battle field where Napoleon who leading a charge against the Austrians, Durant saw the carnage of battle like he had never observed it before. Devastated by what he saw, Durant stayed at the front weeks afterwards helping doctors tend to the wounded in churches and nearby farmhouses.

After his return to Switzerland, still haunted by the images of war, Durant was so distracted that he lost his fortune. Yet, even though his career was derailed, Durant had a deep sense that God was leading him to accomplish something far beyond his plans. Indeed, God did just that. He led Durant to found the Red Cross which has saved millions and millions of lives and given aid to countless victims of war and disaster over the years. For following God's leading and establishing this organization, Henri Durant received the first Nobel Peace Prize.

Another truth found in Exodus 13 that we can apply to our lives today comes with an assurance that God goes before us into our wildernesses. He is out in front of us and knows the way that He is calling us to journey.

I can't speak for you, but that fact gives me great comfort when I am in a season of venturing into the unknown of an uncharted course. Even though, I may step forward gingerly, He is out in front of me and wants to guide me each step of the way. Believe the good news that like the Children of Israel God goes out ahead of us, too.

Listen to this final truth—no matter how dark the night of our despair nor how alone we might feel in the wilderness of our journey, God wants to lead us by the light of His presence. That's exactly what He did in Jesus when He came as Emmanuel, "God with us." He continues to lead us by the light of the Holy Spirit who indwells us who placed our faith in God through Jesus. No matter how dark and discouraging your situation might be, Jesus the Light of the world wants to shine brightly, showing you the way.

When I was a student in seminary, I had the privilege of hearing Dr. Gardner Taylor, an African-American pastor from New York City. I remember being moved by the passion and the power of his words. This week I read about another sermon that he delivered at Harvard Divinity School when He told this wonderful story.

He said that in his early years he was preaching in Louisiana during the Depression. Electricity was just coming into that part of the country, and he was out in a rural black church that had just one little light bulb hanging down from the ceiling to light up the whole sanctuary. He was preaching away, and in the middle of his sermon, all of a sudden, the electricity went out. The building went pitch black, and Dr. Taylor didn't know what to say, being a young preacher. He stumbled around until one of the elderly deacons sitting in the back of the church cried out, "Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!"

Sometimes it takes darkness for us to really see Him. In fact, it may be in the seasons of greatest despair that we see Him most clearly. Just as was true of the Israelites in the desert, the good news of the gospel is that whether or not we can see Him in the dark, He can see us. Praise God for that wonderful assurance!

Application

On this first Sunday of Advent, we are beginning one of the most wonder-filled seasons of the year as we prepare for the birthday of Jesus and as we look forward with expectancy to His return to our world. Along with being filled with joy and celebration, this time of the year is also filled with grief, despair, discouragement and loneliness.

As was true with the Children of Israel, often, our problem is not the world out there bringing us all these problems and pain. Rather than external, many times it is internal. Sometimes it has to do with who or what we are following in life.

If we are being led by a career, it can be like a roller coaster with a lot of ups and downs and sharp turns. If trying to please all the people in our lives is our main purpose, we will often feel like a failure and be dismayed. If money, or status, or sex, or alcohol, or drugs, or pornography, or a drive to be successful or any thing else is the thing that controls our lives and thus leads us, we will be disappointed and fail.

In our Creator's wonderful scheme of things, He wants to be the One who leads us. In the midst of all of the situations of our lives, He wants to be the One who is out in front of us guiding and directing our steps.

Today, as we prepare to celebrate the Sacrament of Communion, we remember and celebrate the life, ministry, death and resurrection of the One who came as the Light of the world. He is the only One capable of being our ultimate leader.

As we gather around this table, I would invite you to lay aside anything that is keeping you from being led by the Light.