

"Plucked Out"

"Snatched From the Jaws of Death"

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-15

Please take note of the second sermon title.

"But who do YOU say that I am? ["you" being in the singular]" It has been said that there is no Scripture verse that gets any more personal, or critical, than the question Jesus put squarely, and unavoidably, before his disciples. Let us be reminded that Matthew, the Gospel writer, closes out his Gospel with what is referred to as "the Great Commission." "Then Jesus came to [the disciples] and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."" (Matthew 28:18-20, NIV) The church has long understood and taught that aside from worshiping God, telling, sharing, infusing the Good News of Jesus to and into the world is the most important, even the most critical thing the church has to be about and do. Jesus of course begins by asking his disciples who other people say he is. After a few plausible possibilities in the minds of the general public are offered, Jesus gets as personal as it gets. "But who do YOU, you personally, say that I am.?" The text doesn't express it, but what is clearly inferred is expressed this way: "I am not so much interested for the moment about what other people say, but who do you, personally, say that I am?" This was the day that Jesus' disciples were presented the opportunity to have what we might call a "Billy Graham" moment. The essence of all of Billy Graham's crusades ended in what some refer to as the alter call. Call upon the name of Jesus and be saved. "Who is Jesus to you, personally?" Dr. Graham understood that a person is not and cannot be saved on the shirt tail of another person. Personal confession is required.

One of the things that endeared my heart as I prayed and contemplated coming here to Bickleton was your sincere devotion to Jesus Christ and your concern for those who had not yet made the good confession. It is still one of our areas of major concern.

Today's sermon and worship emphasis centers around application of this area of concern, and that in terms of several offshoots, namely, worship, Sunday School, and particularly Youth Group. Today, near the end of worship we will not formally end worship but adjourn from our sanctuary and whomever is so moved, will drive over to our school and participate in our annual blessing of our school. Though we won't be going in the building as in the past, we nonetheless will go from place to place externally to pray over and bless the various areas, departments, rooms, and entities that comprise our school and school district. It is critical for us to understand that God is not concerned only with our faith practice as it applies to our church property and our personal faith lives at home. God's advancement of the kingdom of God is expressed outwardly, that is out IN the world, not segregated from it.

Many scholarly studies have observed that there is a direct correlation between the time of a person's life in terms of being exposed to the Gospel and

the chance that they will accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and thus become a life long disciples. The result is that the longer young people go through life the less likely it is they will become disciples of Jesus. In fact, many studies show that the odds drop off precipitously by their mid to late teens. The point? If you are going to reach our young people, you've got to do so by their mid to late teens. For various reasons, both those we would surmise and those we wouldn't guess, this is why we make such a big deal out of the necessity of Youth Group.

As I've noted before (at least once or twice), I've been told that some of the young folk who in the past have come to Youth Group come from histories and families that may be described as somewhat chaotic and unsettled. This is expressed only in descriptive terms, not in pejorative terms. It has been said that for at least a few of these kids over time, Youth Group has functioned as something of a life line to them. Aside from school and school activities, Youth Group provides another slice or segment of life where there is freedom from chaos and dysfunction. It is a place to get a good meal, have fun with their friends after a day of study at school. Even if it is only once a week, for at least some, Youth Group can play a vital role. And, in terms of our Gospel lesson, it is a place where they are exposed to the Gospel, though not always or even usually in such stark and personal terms of "But who do you say Jesus is?!"

We should never forget the Scriptures which say, "Therefore God exalted [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." At some point every person is going to have to give an accounting. Thus we as leaders of this congregation have a deep concern for the present day reality of our young people as we have a concern for their eternal future. Our Elders, Alicia, and I are thus committed to this work that stands before us. It is our intent and endeavor to live out the last of the portion of Scripture I just quoted as found in Philippians. "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." (Phil 2:9-13, NIV)

In case we haven't made the connection yet, this is tied directly to our second sermon title: "Snatched From the Jaws of Death".

In case you haven't seen it or heard of it, this past week I did a Facebook Live mid-week presentation involving Joseph, of "the coat of many colors" fame. If we remember the story, Joseph's brothers sought to kill their brother Joseph because they hated him. His father loved Joseph more than any of the other 11 and God sent Joseph 2 dreams, each of which were interpreted to say that some unknown day in the future these brothers would bow down before and submit to him. This was not only audacious but outrageous to the brothers! The story is found in Genesis 37. But the most important point of my message was found in Genesis 45 where we find Joseph's brothers in the presence of Joseph, though they don't recognize him. He's considerably older and for whatever reasons we

are not told, they don't realize it is Joseph they stand before. Long story short, through all the drama and evil that has transpired, God has preserved the very lives of the whole of Jacob's family. God has saved them from a famine that most likely would have resulted in them all dying a starvation death. In the words and testimony of Joseph, though in my paraphrase, God has snatched this family from the jaws of certain death.

It is precisely this concept and claim that aptly describes what we find in today's OT lesson. Once again, God snatches an unknowable number of baby boys from the jaws of certain death by virtue of the temerity, audacity, the bravery, the loving care, and defiant obedience of the Hebrew midwives. Again, the temerity, audacity, the bravery, the loving care, and the defiant obedience of the Hebrew midwives.

Did you catch those two words I used, "defiant obedience"? What, you may ask, is defiant obedience? In terms of our OT lesson, the Hebrew midwives were absolutely defiant in terms of the demand placed on them by Pharaoh himself. Simultaneously they were perfectly and fully obedient to the LORD God of the Hebrew people. Can you imagine being ordered to kill the very babies you are there to help bring safely into this world? It is beyond unthinkable, is it not? But that is the situation they found themselves inextricably in. Inextricably yes, but not without solution. Obedience to the will of God and defiant to that which stood opposed to God. Not an easy task, but they did it anyway.

The second part of our OT lesson may seem as something of an addendum, or after thought, in terms of the first part. But as part of the over all Lectionary reading, it is simply the next Biblical instance of God snatching a baby from the jaws of death. Evil continues to exist in our world and God keeps snatching victory out of the jaws of seeming defeat. What appears hopeless, turns out to have a solution. It happened with Joseph's most dysfunctional family. It happened in terms of Pharaoh and the Hebrew slaves. And it happened in terms of the baby Moses who was plucked out of the Nile. Life is snatched from the jaws of death.

It perhaps is worth noting again, that the Hebrew word for the "basket" that Moses was placed in as he was set afloat on the Nile is the very same Hebrew word for the "ark" that Noah built. (Genesis 6:14-16) In fact, that one particular and specific Hebrew word is used only in those two places in all of the OT. In both cases pitch, a tarry and waterproof substance was applied to provide safety of the occupants. Thus we know Noah's ark was God's perfect provision of safety to protect the lives of everyone and everything within it and it was precisely the same for baby Moses. He was perfectly safe and secure in his little water proof basket.

It is my firm belief that our church is here in part to be part of a life line for the young people who would come here for Youth Group. It is intriguing, to say the least, to consider that we may be part of God's snatching a young person or persons from the jaws of evil as found in the world of their lives. I'm pretty sure we will rarely, if ever, know the extent to which their time with us will be beneficial to them and to the advancement of the kingdom of God. But, as we are reminded

from time to time, God's in charge of results. We're in charge of obedience as best we can figure it out.

When our Elders assemble for our Session meeting, following our return from school this morning, we will take up the thorny issue of if, when, and/or how to bring Youth Group back on line. I hate to mention it, and I hate to have to always be reminded of it, but Covid-19 continues to be a proverbial thorn in our side. This, I think, is to express it mildly. Whatever the case may be, it is the calling of our church's leadership to figure out what we believe we are called to do and how to go about it. Ordination, in terms of our Ruling Elders, is not simply about decision making as in a generic sense, but decision making in terms of how God desires the kingdom of God to advance. I believe I can accurately say that when Lance, Tom, Chris, and Matt said "yes" to accepting a call to serve as Ruling elder, none of them really knew what they said "yes" to. None of us can ever know what the future holds. But in words that are often used, "It is to just this hour that you have been called." Let me say, furthermore, that though youth leadership is not an ordained position, nevertheless I am convinced that it is to just this hour that Alicia has been called to serve as Youth Director.

But let me add this: you are not left out of the equation. Not at all. Last week I asked that we all become more engaged in prayer for this and other decisions our Session are facing. This is in terms of worship, Sunday School, and Youth Group. Please be in more intentional and specific prayer for our church's leadership in terms of these things. Though the OT text doesn't tell us, I believe it was the Holy Spirit who moved the midwives to obey God and disobey the "king of Egypt", at great risk to their lives. It also was the Holy Spirit at work in the story of baby Moses. It was not happenstance that Pharaoh's daughter just happened to be there to find baby Moses in the basket and it was not just happenstance that Moses' sister Miriam was there to offer to go get a Hebrew woman to nurse the crying and hungry infant. The Holy Spirit was there snatching life from the jaws of death. [Isn't it amazing how some of these themes run through Scripture, over and over?!]

Let us be in prayer particularly today, but also in the days ahead. Our Session and Alicia have a number of thorny issues to juggle, weigh, and work through. I make this request not only of those in this sanctuary, nor of only those who are regular attenders of worship via the internet, but of any who may come across this message, either visually or in terms of this sermon to be found on our web site. We deeply desire the prayers of everyone thus connected with us in this great endeavor of God through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and empowered by his Spirit.

But yet, my message is not through. One last critical lesson from our OT stories we've talked about is this. Never, ever, forget that what presently is the case is NOT the end of the story. It's in, one sense at least, kind of like Paul Harvey's *Rest of the Story*. There is more to know and more to remember and factor in. I think there is some difficulty in understanding how Joseph got through those many years of difficulty and strain. Those events of his lives lasted through many years. And yet, God was at work in ways Joseph could never see looking forward.

Not unrelatedly, the other day I couldn't help but think of Hee Haw's famous character Archie Campbell. One skit he is well-remembered for is the one I refer to as "Oh, that's good! No, that's bad! Oh, that's bad. No, that's good!" Archie and Roy Clark go into their classic routine where Archie tells about some specific event to which Roy responds with either "Oh, that's good!" or "Oh, that's bad!", according to what appears to be the case. But in every exchange what appears to Roy to be one or the other, Archie responds with the opposite. [If you're interested you can google Archie Campbell and "oh, that's bad", etc.] But the point here is that while something at present may be either good or bad, neither type of situation is the end of the story, but which may be turned on its head and be the very opposite. It was terrible what happened to Joseph, and yet God turned things around and did something incredibly good with the string of circumstances. Moses' mother, surely in desperate fear for her baby boy's very life, placed him in a pitched covered basket and set him loose for whatever fate awaited him. Possible death surely is better than certain death. How can we ever imagine what raced through her mind as her hands lowered the basket into the waters of the Nile and as her fingers slowly released her precious baby boy into the unknown. And yet, God snatched victory out of the jaws of death.

We, too, should not lose hope and be as dispirited as we otherwise might be. Trust in God. Pray for our Elders, Alicia, and me. Do this in a positive spirit. This is our prayer and request for you. Amen.