

"Hemmed In By the Desert?"

"Open to True Understanding and Truth"

Exodus 13:17-14:4; Matthew 18:1-4

Many of us remember seeing many cowboy movies where the "good guys" are utterly surrounded by the "bad guys"; this of course could be in terms of bandits or renegade Indians, if you will pardon the outdated expression. The "good guys" would thus be hemmed in on all sides, it would seem, that is, until someone would come in to save the day, such as the Lone Ranger or Roy Rogers and Dale Evans for example. But the point is that the good guys were hemmed in all sides due to the grave danger that surrounded them. There is something of this going on in our OT lesson.

I want to begin today's message with a verbatim written by a fellow who found renewal of life, and even salvation in Jesus, at Union Gospel Mission in Yakima whom we support financially and with our prayers. His story came to me via a Union Gospel newsletter, the article of which is entitled *Rebellion to Restoration*. Since the newsletter is sent out in a public forum, I believe it is proper to share his story here this morning. In fact, by its distribution we know it is their desire that as many people as possible read and share this story. Please know that I post their newsletters, and others, on our bulletin boards (office and sanctuary entrance), for your use. The fellow's name is Kai.

"I was born in Kazakhstan to a teen mother. I spent several months in the ICU then was sent to an orphanage shortly after. While in the orphanage I received terrible mistreatment for years, part of which included ongoing sexual abuse. After being adopted, the road was painful and rocky for my parents and I. Because of the sexual and physical abuse I had received at the hands of my female caretakers in the orphanage, I harbored distrust and bitterness towards my mother and found myself taking my anger out on her. Things got so bad that my parents sent me to a youth ranch for troubled kids. Things seemed to get worse and resulted in me getting kicked out of my parents' house. After a long cycle of manipulating and stealing from family, friends, and my family's church, I turned myself in. I figured going to jail and hitting rock bottom would allow me to surrender everything to God. I was let out on one year of probation, 90 days in county jail, and \$7,500 in restitution payments. After jail I found myself empty-handed with no money and a whole lot of burnt bridges. The Mission was my only option. I had a lot of preconceived notions about the Mission and was scared to go. I started volunteering in the kitchen, then later on in the pantry and was living on site at the Mission full-time. My faith remained the same the first couple months of being there, basically: non-existent. Then after meeting Trevor Pynch (Men's New Life Program Assistant Director), things started to shift and I began to see the visible representation of Jesus through the way he loved people, including myself. The Holy Spirit began softening my heart and on April 10, 2017, I gave my life to Christ. God stirred in me a fire and I went out and got a job at Shields to pay off my restitution. After a year of ups and downs, I came back to the Mission and was offered the position as the Men's Shelter Manager. I am able to use this platform that the Lord graciously presented me with to share

the message of God's love to the men of the Yakima Valley. Only God can bring such beauty from the ashes."

This brief article is entitled "Rebellion to Restoration".

It was just a short time after I had settled upon our Scripture texts for this morning that, somehow, my attention was drawn to this article hanging on the bulletin board in our church office. As my attention was first drawn to the title - Rebellion to Restoration - I couldn't help but think that there was some connection with our Scripture lessons. Thinking about humankind in general, not only via Scripture, practical experience and observation reminds us that rebellion is a common lot for us all. It started in the Garden of Eden with the first couple, Adam and Eve, and was thereafter bequeathed to all future generations in and through their family, most particularly and visibly Cain. At what age do young children in our day begin to display various forms and instances of a rebellious attitude and predisposition? An accurate answer might be, "Very young." Who could argue otherwise? One central theme of today's message is of course rebellion. The other is trusting and obeying God.

Let us remember that the journey the emancipated Hebrew slaves were now beginning was something of which they had dreamed for a very long time. But little could they know of the arduous journey that lay ahead of them, that it would be fraught with more perils than they could ever have imagined. The journey ahead would be fraught with perils from without and perils from within. They needed round-the-clock care as we would say. It is a rather well-known part of the exodus story where the Scripture says, "By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people." (Exodus 13:21-22, NIV) Long have we been taught that this was reference to God's 24/7, around the clock, never ceasing leadership, love, and care for his beloved people. It reminds us that whether in the bright light of day or in the darkest hour of night, there is no time God is not available and there to lead and guide his beloved people.

We can interpret and apply this both literally and figuratively. Whether during the daytime or nighttime God is always available and there for us. Just as true, God is here for us in the spiritually and/or mentally dark times as he is during the bright times of our lives.

I couldn't help but think sorrowfully about Kai's very troubled life. It's bad enough when we are masters of our own terrible fate, but to consider that the sexual assault and other forms of harm came from without, that is, from the women who had been entrusted with his care, well, it's heart-breaking to say the least. Kai lived in a real life bondage at the hands of others. I wonder if there isn't some connection here with the Israelites as they found themselves suddenly free from the iron-fisted bondage of their former Egyptian taskmasters. Their long-desired freedom came at last, but suddenly they were threatened by the pursuing Egyptian army. Even the road to freedom can be fraught with disappointments and set backs. It seems a strange twist in the story for them to be released but then have that freedom threatened with reversal in terms of a

looming capture and forced-return to Egypt, most probably for worse treatment than before. However, it would seem that the LORD was beginning the work of teaching the Israelites that not only could they trust the LORD but that they would be expected to learn and live in to that trust. That indeed would be a journey of epic proportions. This, it would seem, would be a life long endeavor. How does a person trust anything and anyone when one has every earthly reason to do anything but trust? Ask Kai. To accentuate this point, let us remember that the Israelites wound up wandering around the desert for 40 years (interpreted by some to mean "a very long time"). In other words in terms of a whole generation.

I found the words and musing of Pharaoh fascinating for the text tells us, "Pharaoh will think, `The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.'" Our sermon title is in the form of a question: "Hemmed in by the Desert?" The "desert" stands metaphorically as a place and time of learning to trust God. Geographically and physically the Israelites were hemmed in on every side. Hemmed in on every side they were at the mercy of their enemy.

And yet, God was there for them. Could they trust the LORD? Would they trust the LORD? Was everything as bleak as it seemed? Who knew? Only the future would reveal it to them. What an interesting correlation there is between this ancient event and the most recent series of events for Kai. One wonders, in one sense, how Kai could come to saving trust and faith in God in Christ Jesus. But on the other hand, according to Kai's testimony, it was the work of the Holy Spirit that began to soften his heart and for the Gospel to make the in-road.

I've used this true story and our Scripture lessons for two distinct but different purposes this morning. The first purpose has to do with our congregation's sincere and dedicated interest in missions, all of which we support financially and with our prayers. It is important to turn our focus from time to time to the various missions and missionaries we support both financially and with our prayers. It occurred to me the other day that that our mission emphasis usually focuses more on the missions that involve individual "missionaries", that is, specific individuals who labor in the mission fields around the world. I think that we do not typically think of Union Gospel Mission in quite the same way as we do our missionaries who work in, say, Mexico or Senegal, due to the lack of a specifically identified individual or individuals; nevertheless they are a mission to the lost. Kai's testimony testifies to the good work God is doing among the lost. In context of the present story, we're talking about a young boy who was hemmed in on every side by the realities of life that, at least initially, were not of his doing. How many of us can begin to identify with him and his story? I know I cannot for I have not walked in his shoes or anything like them.

The second reason I use this story and our Scripture lessons is because they speak a word to our purpose, individually and as a congregation, in this part of God's kingdom.

This morning we resumed adult Sunday School after a summer's hiatus. I believe there is a collective belief that there never is a time reached when we have, as it is said, pretty much learned it all, and that we have a fairly-mature and

comprehensive understanding of the Gospel, that we've pretty much learned all there is to know about human nature.

One of the over all lessons from the story of the Hebrews released into an unknown and unprecedented freedom is that they had to learn from scratch 2 things. First, they had to learn a moral code, and, second, they had to learn a particular religious code. Neither would that be an easy task, nor would it happen overnight. While in captivity as slaves to the Egyptians the Hebrew people were obliged to live under whatever moral or religious laws happened to be in place. But suddenly, upon their release into an unknown freedom of which they had pined for for centuries, including the ramifications of which they could never have imagined, they were a people that needed a moral, civil, and religious foundation unlike anything they'd ever heard, seen, or lived under.

This, I believe, should be easy enough to comprehend and accept. But what is equally important is the fact of the on-going, never ceasing need for teaching and reteaching, learning and relearning. Not only is it a long term process but, by necessity, a repetitive one. Over and over we have to learn and grow because learning and learning anew seems to be followed by forgetting and defection. This is hinted at in our Gospel lesson.

Historically there has been many interpretations of today's Gospel lesson, as well as others that deal with what it means "to become like little children." Some interpretations focus on the innocence of little children. "Children are so innocent when they are little and young." we are reminded. However true and appropriate this is in some sense, on the other hand how do we reconcile this view with the fact that little children can at times be vicious, and the fact that most children, even from the earliest months of life, from time to time display a clear sense of selfishness - children, even small children, are frequently seen taking things away from or hitting another child. We know that children can surprise us with amazing amounts of charity, sharing, and warmth, but then turn on a dime and do the opposite. Children can charm our hearts but then suddenly do the inexplicable.

Our Gospel lesson teaches us, primarily, (and this is our major take away this morning) that we all, regardless of age, need to be something of an open book, ready and eager for learning. One of the things that I've learned from our granddaughter is that she loves, absolutely loves, to learn new things. Not only does she love to learn new things but she then takes those things and becomes very innovative with them. However.... We also must remember that eagerness to learn, appropriate, and innovate is only properly served if and when what is taught is of the right stuff.

The Hebrew slaves, in terms of religion, only knew that which they knew via their Egyptian overlords. Egyptian religion was all they knew. There isn't time or necessity of going into the specifics of the religion of Egypt of that time. It is only important to point out that the LORD had a pretty impressive, if not daunting, task ahead of him. The LORD would have to start from scratch. It would take a generation to even begin making a dent in the over all project. Actually, that work is still going on today.

In terms of learning, what humility does is to open us up to what is true, moral, and right, whether in terms of the moral or religious life. Humility is a prerequisite to loving and serving God properly. Humility is a prerequisite to living well and living honorably with our neighbor. The Bible is as concerned with the moral life as it is the Gospel life and the salvation of souls. Conversely said, the Bible is as concerned with the saving of souls as it is concerned with the morality of not only Christians, but all people.

It is sometimes assumed that humility is a sign of weakness, that being humble will keep us vulnerable and susceptible to the wiles of Satan and thus be led astray away from God; it is sometimes assumed that humility will make us vulnerable to those who would harm us. The truth is, however, having humility as a key character trait doesn't mean we have to be, or will be, weak-kneed or gullible; in fact, true humility ends up fortifying what we've been taught is, or suspect to be, truth. When we're talking about humility, we're talking about being humble enough to more fully search out and trust God and to live out what God teaches us is his way and what is best for the human creature. True humility thus should end up making us stronger and more resilient rather than weak and gullible.

As many of us know from experience, there are times when we feel hemmed in on every side by temptations and schemes, temptations that stem from the wiles of Satan and schemes that stem from the evil deeds and desires of other people. Some of these temptations and schemes are blatant and obvious while others are subtle and sometimes even hidden, hidden but which suddenly emerge like a roaring lion. As only one example, things may be going good but suddenly someone says or does something which causes us to get very angry, perhaps angry enough to do something rash. Indeed, sometimes it has nothing to do with what another person does, per se. Sometimes it comes from inside us.

What comes to mind is the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16). Abel's offering to the LORD was acceptable to the LORD while Cain's was not. Instead of looking inwardly and trying to figure out what was unacceptable about his offering Cain simply let his anger rule the day and murdered his brother. It wasn't Abel's fault after all. Cain suddenly found himself with a situation and became very angry. Why didn't he look inwardly rather than at Abel? In fact, why didn't he ask the LORD as to what was defective about his offering? This is why being firmly grounded in God's Word is vitally critical to the person who wants to please God and avoid the pitfalls of life that can so hem us in and threaten us in unimaginable ways. Being firmly grounded in God's Word is vitally critical to the person who wants to be a living example of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Let me close noting that from time to time I remind us that there is no worse witness to the Gospel than a dour, sour Christian. Let me modify or add an addendum to that: Equally harmful to the Gospel message is the Christian life that is at odds with what the Scriptures teach us. Whether hemmed in from without due to the deeds and schemes of others, or hemmed in from within due to our own schemes, sins, and failures, we are better prepared when we are

humble before God because we are ready to learn anew. Humility makes us more ready and able to stand firm against that which besmirches the name of Jesus.

Whether we learn in Sunday School or in worship, or in our own private Bible study and devotion time, we are better prepared for the times when we are hemmed in on every side. This is a promise of Scripture. Amen.