

September 20, 2020

Exodus 12: 1-14

Romans 13: 1-10

Blood in the Mud
The Reverend Evans McGowan

As Travis and Jane flew down the highway in their car with their two dogs, trees exploded as smoke filled the air. The whole world was on fire. They dodged a falling tree only to hit a rock slide and blow a tire. With still miles to go before they could escape the wildfire that had engulfed their town, they turned around and drove on the rim of their wheel 7 miles back to Detroit... Detroit, Oregon, that is! They gathered with 70 other people at a boathouse in a clearing, waiting for the National Guard with helicopters to come rescue them. The helicopters came, but with 65 mph winds and smoke billowing everywhere, were unable to land, and after 4 hours had to return before running out of fuel. The fire is now completely surrounding them, and they're covered in debris and ash. More people keep coming, with nowhere else to go. Nobody could get out. They were trapped.

The firefighters who were stuck with them decided to make a last stand. They moved everyone to the docks, and made a wall of firetrucks to create a water barrier between the people and the flames... a last wall of defense, a desperate effort to stave off certain death. And that's when someone at the Forest Service radioed to say they found a narrow escape path out. This was their chance: a make-or-break moment.

So they all loaded up into a single file convoy of fire trucks, RVs and pickup trucks, and they headed out of there on a narrow, little road with smoke and flames roaring up on either side of it. There's a wall of flame to their left, and trees continue to fall down. Several times the convoy had to stop as firefighters got out to chainsaw and remove trees that had fallen and blocked their path. Another fire to the north threatened to trap them once more, and they had to stay all together so they did not lose each other in all of the smoke and sound and fury.

Ultimately, they made it. Shaken but not crushed, they made it out alive. Later they got a picture from the fire department showing that their house had been spared. They were some of the lucky ones. The death toll is now in the double-digits and the estimated damage from these fires will be in the billions of dollars.¹

I often wonder what it would be like to wait for rescue... to long for escape that may never come.

While few of us have been in such harrowing situations as Travis and Jane and others suffering from the climate fires out west, many of us are longing for an escape these days. We want to escape our houses and perhaps even our jobs... we long to be outside with friends, to return to restaurants and other social places, and not worry

¹This story was adapted from an episode of the NYT podcast The Daily on 15 Sept 2020: www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/podcasts/the-daily/oregon-wildfires.html.

about spreading an unseen virus, endangering other or ourselves. And as Michiganders, we know that: Winter is Coming, and soon we will be back indoors and perhaps feeling even more isolated than ever before.

In our passage today, the Lord has heard the cry of God's people... Let my people go! cries God through Moses. The Hebrews have been enslaved for generations, and it is now time for their escape. They are to slaughter lambs and use the blood as protection. They are to be ready to go, with unleavened bread, their sandals on their feet and their cloaks tucked in and ready to leave at a moment's notice. Then the Spirit of the Lord will pass over them, seeing the blood of the lamb and sparing them the death of their firstborn. It is an ominous beginning to their escape from Egypt, and the journey of 40 years is only about to begin. Yet right here in the beginning there is a sign that they will be Getting There Together.

Verse 4: If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor. They are to look out for one another, to share with those who do not have the wherewithal to sacrifice a lamb. Jesus would later expand the symbolism as the Lamb of God for the entire world, both Gentile and Jew, and both neighbor and stranger are welcomed into the fold.

Blood is a powerful sign, is it not? We don't like the sight of blood. We would rather turn away. After all, blood should stay inside our skin. Many of the ancients including the Greeks thought the soul or life-force of beings rested in their blood. So to see blood was to see life being poured out where it wasn't supposed to be.

This year, we have seen many things we would wish to deny or turn away from.

An invisible virus that will soon claim 200,000 American lives and a million worldwide.

Wildfires consuming forests out West, down in the Amazon and elsewhere as our planet spirals out of control.

And each week is a report of another person of color brutalized if not murdered by persons sworn to preserve and protect.

It's like the entire world is sick and covered in blood.

There is blood in the mud. People are crying out for justice. Our planet is shrieking for protection.

To look away doesn't make it go away. The lives lost cry out to us, to God, to anyone who will see and listen: This shouldn't be!

Something is wrong, terribly wrong.

In times like these, we often look for a savior, someone who will come to our rescue. One could argue it was Moses for the Hebrews. It was Jesus for the early Christians. It was the Black Panther for many of our young people.

At the very least, we are looking for leadership - someone to take charge and lead us out of an impossible situation. Where are our firefighters?

In this context, we would love to be able to trust those in charge. Yet they appear just as lost as we are. That's what makes this text from Romans 13 so troubling.



Are we really to believe they are God's servants? Must we submit to them as if they were God's representatives on earth? And not only that, but actually pay for their salaries and fund their projects - by paying taxes? Benjamin Franklin's words ring all too true: Two things are certain in life - death and taxes - and that was well before there was an income tax!

Yet let us keep reading, for often Paul gets taken out of context when he is making his way to a larger point:

Paul goes on to note that the entire law is summed up in one command, to Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does not harm to a neighbor. That's what all of those 10 commandments were about: No murder or stealing or coveting. Do no harm. It's the creed of our medical professionals as well as our Christian creed. Love fulfills the law.

But what if the government is harming your neighbor? What if the neighbor you love is not being treated justly, or fairly, or even decently? What then? Must we really submit to authorities who are unjust, even unlawful to the very laws they are sworn to preserve and protect?

I cannot speak for all governments and all peoples across time and history. But as a citizen of America and as a citizen of the Kingdom of God, I do believe I can say this: As a democracy, "we the people" are the authority. We must answer to ourselves, let alone God or some other authority. One way we do that is voting. As the late John Lewis said, "The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democracy. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it."

In our Presbyterian system of doing things decent and in order, we welcome new officers and new members today by vote. We are one body in Christ, a priesthood of all believers, where each one of us as members has voice and vote.

In this way, we are Getting There Together: through nonviolent communication, through virtual committee meetings and drawn out email chains... no, it isn't always pretty. But by doing things decently and in order, we discern the will of Holy Spirit.

It's messy, I know. At times, it's not fun. It's hard work.

And yet it's meaningful work. Holy work. Love work.

What do we Presbyterians have to say in this moment?

Not law and order but courage and justice...

And do things decently and in order.

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It is not decent to shoot a man seven times in the back at point blank range and then shackle him to his bed while he's paralyzed.

It is not decent to kneel on a man's neck for nine minutes as he cries out for his momma until he dies and is buried next to his mother.

It is not decent to have your home invaded and be shot in your own home by the people who are meant to protect you.

We must stand against violence in all forms, including that of the state.

And to be clear: a 17 year old with an assault rifle is NOT law and order.

There's blood in the mud y'all! People are dying from a virus, since Covid-19 came knocking at our doors, or since 1619 when Africans first reached our shores.

Now is NOT the time to turn away but to *lean in*, as our sisters in humanity might say.

And so... I believe, at times, we are called to question Authority.

When "That's what he said" is authoritative... but "That's what she said" is a lewd joke... we need to check our view on authority.

When the truth is masked by fiction and lies are dressed with facts, we need to question the trustworthiness of our source.

When we argue about "right versus left" rather than "right versus wrong"... our values of authority are misplaced.

Closing polls, limiting rights to go vote, rigged elections...

Immigration: separation, cages, hysterectomies

When "blood and soil" become a rallying cry... rather than seeing blood in the soil... we have misplaced our authority.

What authority we have, we have from loving our neighbor.

Church attendance is not a good gauge of a society's morality. Justice is.

Loving our neighbor is the fulfillment of Christ's law, the law that governs the Kingdom of God.

And we have work to do.

How are we repairing what is broken?

How are we healing who is wounded?

One thing I know for sure: We cannot go it alone.



Just like Janice and Travis.

Just like Moses and the Hebrews.

Just like Paul and the early Christians.

We need each other. We are all connected. For better or for worse.

A man may lose his life But a movement lives on forever.

With God's help, let's make the movement move.

Let us love one another.

Let us get there.

Together.

With God's Loving Spirit to guide us when we lose our way.

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