

# Scripture Readings and Sermon

*September 13, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin*

## **Commentary on Exodus 13:17-22, 14:19-22, 26-27, 30-31** (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

Following Passover, the journey to the promised land according to scholars is told across Exodus 13:17-18:27, Numbers 10:11-36:13, and Deuteronomy 31:1-34:12 with the rest including Leviticus focused on the Law. While the original lectionary was a straight reading from 14:19-31, it felt important to include the segment from 13:17-22 to explain why they went to the Red Sea and introduce the cloud and pillar of fire. Sections removed from the lectionary reading focus in detail on the death of the Egyptians. While Hollywood enjoys revealing in death, the point of the story is the power of God to deliver which is covered in verses 26-27. While questions of the location of the Red Sea and how the waters became divided are fodder for speculation but numerous media source, the scriptures do explain why the Israelites traveled the long way to the promised land. Passover may have gather them together as a people but it would be their time in the desert that forged them into a nation. While the teaching of the law created one identity and the trials of the desert tested the will of the people and their leaders, they first had to sever their ties to Egypt through the Red Sea experience. Through this experience, they began to rely on God and God's messenger Moses to show them the way although their faith was often fickle.

*Exodus 13:22 Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

When David proposes the Temple, God reminds him that God has always traveled with the people. Looking back, can you see how God has traveled with you?

Noticing that the cloud and pillar were in front, have you always been looking for where God is leading?

The only time the cloud and pillar move is to protect the people's rear flank. Do you feel the God "has your back"?

When has God protected you and made a way when there seemed to be no way?

## **Commentary on Matthew 18:21-35** (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

Following Jesus' encouragement to avoid stumbling blocks, restore those lost, and resolve conflicts, Peter asks the key to performing all of these tasks - forgiveness. While Peter focuses on the outward act of forgiveness, Jesus examines the internal attitude of loving forgiveness which comes from a knowledge of our own forgiveness by God. This knowledge becomes a well spring which is not limited to seven acts of forgiveness but rather flows from the ongoing forgiveness of the Father. To illustrate this, Jesus tells the parable of the king and the slaves. As slaves of sin, we owe a debt that can never be paid not because of an ancient covenant but rather because our own selfishness corrupts our relationship with our neighbors as well as with God. Forgiveness is both the acknowledgment of the damage that brokenness of sin has caused and the release of the power of that brokenness to continue to affect the relationships. Forgiveness does not mean placing ourselves in the same situation to either cause or receive the same pain of sin. Instead when we forgive our neighbor, we are releasing ourselves from the power their past actions have over our present and future and we remove ourselves from situations that caused our own sinful actions. Just as God has released us from our bondage to sin through forgiveness offered in Jesus, we are called to release ourselves and others so that all may experience the freedom God offers.

Matthew 18:21 Jesus said, "how often should I forgive?"

What does it mean to you that God has released you from all your past mistakes?

Have you released yourself from the guilt and shame?  
Are you still unable to release others or has anger and regret become your masters?  
Is it difficult to view forgiveness as a gift to you even more than for the person you are forgiving?

### **Commentary on Romans 14:1–12** (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

After dealing with civil obedience, Paul turns his attention to traditions. The issue of vegetables versus meat is not about issues used by modern vegetarians but rather deals with sacrificial and ritual cleanliness in the various traditions of congregation members. Within certain traditions, like the Jewish tradition, certain animals are unclean while others use specific animals as sacrifices to pagan gods. Eating only vegetables, especially in a community setting, was an attempt by some not to eat animals that had been previously offered to a pagan god and then sold by a butcher. The same is true of special days that were dedicated to various gods. In modern terms, Thursday and Friday are names for old Norse gods. Rather than changing the names, Christians dedicated the days to the Lord. Instead of dividing the community based on past traditions, Paul sought to unify the community by claiming every aspect of life for God in Christ Jesus. This is the point he is making when he says, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves". Rather than judging each other based on the appropriateness of traditions such as the celebration of All Saints, when Christmas should be celebrated, or renaming Easter, Paul reminds us to keep our eyes on Christ to whom every knee should bow and every tongue confess. By focusing on following the Lord, we have less time to criticize our neighbor.

Romans 14:12 "each of us will be accountable to God."

How often have you been in a church that has focused so much on the quality of the tree that they lose sight of the forest God has given?

Do you find yourself reminding people to focus on Jesus or have you been sucked into the petty arguments that divide the Body of Christ?

What would it look like if those that have spent so much energy criticizing the appropriateness of Christian holidays had instead used that energy to celebrate the message of Christ instead?

How does it feel knowing that you will be judged as harshly as you have judged others?

### **Sermon "Dancing with God"** ([Sermon Video](#))

On Sunday, I used the illustration of dancing with my wife to bring the three scripture stories together. Each reading on its own has a powerful message: God will make a way, power of forgiveness, and the danger of judging. Sometimes the challenge is not what to preach but how to weave so many important messages together. What follows is a brief summary of that attempt.

The first step in dancing with God is deciding to step onto the floor and allow God to lead. My High School years as an awkward teen witnessed me sitting alone at many a dance. Either I was too shy to ask someone or I was simply a horrible dancer. It was not until I met Leighanne that I found a partner I could dance with. From the first moment, it was like we had been dancing together all of our lives which I attribute to her being a gifted and experienced country dancer. I found a partner that while she let me lead also helped me learn how to lead in so many ways.

When the Israelites first left Egypt, God never left their side as a cloud by day or a pillar by night. God led them into the wilderness and, as the Egyptian army approached, God protected them. When it seemed impossible for them to go forward, God made a way. It was still up to them, however, to take that first step in crossing the sea. They needed to step out in faith with God trusting that he was there and that he would lead them. The first step in dancing with God is to take that first step.

I remember Leighanne not only showing how to place my feet but more importantly how to

listen to the beat of the music. There is a moment when you first start dancing that you have to forget about your feet and simply feel the music. If you are not careful, your thoughts will begin to fight the music and the dance becomes a train wreck. Letting go is the second step to dancing.

In Greek, to forgive is to release from the net. Like a fish caught in a net, we often find ourselves bound by shame, guilt, anger, and fear. God offers us release from all of that if we simply let go. We not only need to let go of everything that bind us but we also need to let go of past pains and hurts. Like catching a large fish when you are in a small boat in the middle of deep water, sometimes the only way to save yourself is to let go. The net of unforgiveness that we hang onto keeps us in the past and in our tombs. Offering forgiveness is not about the other person but it is about finding life for ourselves. It is only when we let go and simply live into the dance that God has invited us to that we can fully enjoy the life we have been given.

There were moments when we dance that the only people in the room were Leighanne and myself. Time stopped and we floated on the music lost in the moment. These are times when I have felt the most alive and truly a peace. The final step in dancing is the sheer joy of being with your partner on the dance floor. In that moment of joy, you don't care about who is watching or judge how other people are dancing. All you know is the person you are with. Dancing with God should be this same way. If you are dancing with Christ, who cares about the other people that have been invited or how they choose to dance. With God as your partner, you can find heaven on earth. The kingdom of God is at hand if we repent of our need to lead and believe that we are truly free to dance.