

# Thy Will Be Done

Exodus 13:17- 14:20 (21-31) & Matthew 6: 5-15

*Third Sunday of Easter/ 30<sup>th</sup> April 2006/*

*Growing in God's Grace Campaign – Inspiration Week II*

Many cars these days, especially rental cars, have Global Positioning Systems that allow you to get where you need to go without getting lost. They're tiny computers that go right on the dash board of your car. If you get lost, the system communicates with a satellite in space to tell you where you need to go. It's an amazing technological instrument. A little voice tells you when to make a right turn or when to turn left, and gives you plenty of warning when to exit the interstate. And if you make a wrong turn, the system recalibrates and tells you how to get back on track.

In reading this account in Exodus, it seems Moses and the Israelites could have benefited from such a device. They probably wouldn't have wandered so long in the wilderness, maybe getting there in a few years instead of forty. *While they might have arrived at their destination sooner, they would have missed something far more important: the purpose of the journey. And the purpose of the journey was to learn to trust in Yahweh.* Sure, they could have taken a more direct route to the Promised Land. But the text says that Yahweh *intentionally* took them on a "roundabout way," the long way home. God didn't send them on the shortest route, but the *correct* route, the exact route the Israelites needed to take in order to discover how to trust completely in Yahweh. It was the *route of discovery* because along that way they needed to learn how to be *directed by the will of God* and at the same time rely upon *God's providence*.

Human nature being what it is, this didn't come easy – it never does. Remember, the Israelites really didn't know Yahweh and most of them probably didn't know Moses very well either. With Pharaoh's army closing in behind them and the waters of the Red Sea before them, fear overtakes them. They can't see forward, can't see the way ahead, not sure what will unfold. They panic and protest to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?" Sure, we were in captivity there and enslaved, but at least we had food and shelter. We would rather serve the Egyptians than die in this godforsaken place. Moses, a gifted leader, tries to calm them down, directing them to trust in Yahweh. "Do not be afraid," he says. But it seems that Moses is also privately panicking, at least to God. Moses is stuck in the middle. With the Israelites grumbling and full of doubt on one side and God on the other who has issued a divine directive to Moses. Yahweh then says, "Why do you cry out to me?"

Tell the Israelites to go *forward*.” As for you, Yahweh says, “Moses, lift up your staff and stretch out your hand and watch what happens. Trust me, I know what I’m doing”.

We might hope to have complete trust in this kind of God, but to live this way, actually trusting in God, that’s tough. Egypt represents for us the *status quo*. Sure, it might not be great, in fact, life might be pretty awful, but at least it’s known, predictable, and in some bizarre way dependable. Most resist change and would rather stay where we are. Better to stay with the known than to risk venturing into the unknown. Better to stay behind than die in the wilderness. This is fine, I guess. But I want something more than that in my life. I’m not satisfied with the known, the *status quo*. Poet, W. H. Auden (1907-1973) once said, “We would rather be ruined than changed. We’d rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die.”<sup>1</sup>

The cross of the moment for the Israelites was the question – will we really be open to God’s guidance? It’s a kind of cross in that its answer is costly and requires a sacrifice. And what is sacrificed or given up here is their preference to direct their own feet and go where they wanted to, trusting in their own resources. God was guiding them, by cloud and fire, but when they couldn’t see a way out of death, the people forgot God and took matters into their own hands. Whenever that happens, it’s never good.

The person of faith wants to be guided by God. That’s what we tell ourselves, at least, usually with some guilt because we know we’re not very good at it. Being open to God’s guidance is tough. Sometimes we pray for guidance, but often what we’re really saying is, “God, confirm the decision I’ve *already* made and let me know it is okay.” Such a prayer for guidance is little more than confirmation that what we’ve concluded is right.

But I think to ask God for genuine guidance means to be really open to where we need to go, and what we need to do. It often involves setting aside what we think is the right way or the correct thing to do. It means being open to what God might say, not assuming we already know the answer. It means being surprised by the unknown. But the unknown scares us. People are willing to change, will give up or let go old thoughts, old ways of being if they have a sense the new thing they will take up or take hold of will be better. We will go forward when we have a sense of security. But God tells Israel, “Forward,” with no assurance they will survive. All they have to go on is

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<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, “The Age of Anxiety” (1948).

the assurance of Moses, and their memory – that God was faithful to them in the past, providing clouds and fire, and God will be faithful to them in the future. You see, God wants our trust and in order to discover it we're called into places that stretch us and challenge, in order for us to experience God's love. We can stay where we are or step out and discover what it's like to live in the will of God.

I believe God is calling us upon a journey in our **Growing in God's Grace** capital campaign. The campaign is not a fundraiser, but our "cross of the moment," an exercise in trust to help us *cross over* to a deeper trust in God. God wants every one of us to grow, to grow up into mature Christians, and one of the ways God encourages growth is by putting us into situations where we are challenged. God puts us in these positions – *not to test or tempt us* – but to stretch us, sort of like going on an Outward Bound expedition. Sometimes we don't know the inner resources within us or discover the limits of our strength until we are put in those settings where we have to depend upon God. That's where the growth takes place. The Exodus journey was the most definitive experience in Israel's history and remains so today. In their journey – a long Outward Bound expedition – they discovered who they are and who God is, all in the stretch.

It's the stretch that matters. Think of a violin string – if it's too slack, you can't get any music out of it (or not what you want to hear), if it's too tight, it will snap. But when the tension, the stretch is just right, the string will begin to sing.

In this season of prayer and discovery, moving toward Commitment Sunday in a few weeks, God is calling us on a journey in which we are being asked to discern our level of financial commitment. We're not sure what's going to happen on that Sunday when pledges are made. You know the need, \$1 million dollars. This money will allow us to strengthen the overall ministry of this church. But in many ways, it's not about the money, the destination, as it were, but how we get there that matters for us. We can look over our savings and investments, talk with our financial planner to see how much we can afford to give to the campaign, and let it go at that. To approach our decision this way would make it primarily a *financial* decision and that's fine, but it could be so much more if we reframed it. Remember, we began and continue to infuse this campaign with prayer because we believe it is more than about finances. It's not so much about the money (although that is important), as it is an opportunity to open ourselves up to the will and providence of God and discovering the joy that comes with truly trusting in the Lord to provide. Let's reframe what we're being asked to do: *Make a Spirit-led decision which will have financial implications*. That's why last week I urged us to slow down in deciding what our commitment will be so that we can pray and be open to God's guidance, which means taking the time to really listen to what God places in your heart, asking, "God, what would you do through me for your ministry in this

place?” Let the question take root, allow it to germinate, letting the Spirit *grow an answer* that conforms to the will of God.

That’s basically what Israel struggled with and what Jesus petitions for us in his prayer and what a person of faith aspires toward – *knowing and doing God’s will*. And what is God’s will for us? That we grow, grow up, grow up into the full stature and maturity of life in Christ (Ephesians 4:13), which means placing our confidence and trust in God. It means removing ourselves from dead-center and allowing God to live there instead, at the center of our lives. Then we discover the purpose of our unique lives. When we give up the center and give it to God, such a sacrifice becomes a delight because then we discover what life is for and why you were born and what matters most. The hope of Jesus’ petition in the Lord’s Prayer is that our lives will be conformed to the very things that give God joy and delight. The cross and empty tomb show us the gladness of God – the radical love of grace that shakes the foundations of death and brings new life. What is God’s will for us? *Giving your life to and participating in that which gives life to God’s people and to the world*. It means aligning yourself with God’s hopes and dreams for God’s beloved humanity and good creation.

But how do you know God’s will, whether in this campaign commitment or any decision? There’s only one answer. *It is found only in prayer*. To pray the Lord’s Prayer is a dangerous, risky undertaking. For as a community prays, “Thy will be done,” it opens itself to God’s stretching and to God’s purposes.<sup>2</sup> When we’re open, then God can speak. How do you know for sure? How about another violin illustration?

When a violin is perfectly in tune, one string – say the D string – will vibrate and resonate with the other strings forming a complementary, harmonic resonance. All the strings will sing together in what’s known as “sympathetic vibration.” When this happens the entire instrument just sings.<sup>3</sup>

Knowing God’s will is kind of like that “sympathetic vibration.” It is achieved only through prayer, yielding a deep sense of joy, in you and in God. When one is conformed to God’s vision, when one’s life is aligned with God’s hope, God’s joy becomes our joy. We come alive, everything comes alive. We resonate with God – *every thing lives when we’re in tune*.

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<sup>2</sup> James V. Brownson, Inagrace T. Dietterich, Barry A. Harvey, Charles C. West, *Storm Front: The Good News of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 117.

<sup>3</sup> I’m grateful to Laurie White for this illustration and for demonstrating how it works with her violin during worship.

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