

“At the River’s Edge”
Exodus 1:15-17, 22; 2:1-10
10th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

It is good to be back with all of you this morning.
My sabbatical was wonderful, absolutely delightful.
I feel rested, refreshed, but make no mistake, I missed all of you.

So let me begin by saying thank you.

Thank you to my incredible colleagues who did such an outstanding job from the pulpit, leading worship and moderating Session meetings and covering their responsibilities as well as my responsibilities for the past three months. No surprise, their leadership meant that I never had to worry about what was happening at Westminster over the past 12 weeks.

Thank you to the Session for granting this time. And to all of you for being so supportive of this time away...it was the longest that I have been away from the pulpit and the daily tasks of parish ministry since I was ordained back in 1998.

I was going to say that I didn’t know what to do with myself, but wouldn’t you know it, on the very first morning of my sabbatical, my wife handed me a list of things to do so that I wouldn’t get bored...

In all seriousness, I am more grateful for this past summer than I can adequately say.

Some of you have asked how I spent my time, and when I wasn’t working around the house or visiting other churches to talk about how they handle fundraising and finances, I did some hiking.

Explored some trails I had never walked before.

For example, this summer was my first time to the top of Table Rock. But I also explored some of the other trails at that park as well. And one day in June, I was walking up one of those other trails when I heard a loud rustling in the trees. My first thought was that it was a squirrel, but something in my mind told me that it was too loud to have been a squirrel. So I looked to see what had made the noise, and I saw something MUCH larger than a squirrel start to run away.

I thought to myself, why is there a big black dog without its owner on this mountain?

It took me a moment to realize I was not looking at a dog.
I was looking at the back of a bear!

Let's just say that this Midwestern boy who did not grow up around mountains has NEVER been that close to a bear before! It was maybe 10, 15 yards away from the trail...

Clearly, the bear was headed toward the trail but then it heard me, and turned the other way. And even though the bear turned to go the other way, I immediately cut my hike short, spun on my heels, and went back the way I came.

When I got back to the trailhead, I asked the state park employee in the main office, "What's the proper protocol when you see a bear?"

Do you get big?
Do you make noise?

He said, "Well, you can always just stand and look at it."
Hmmm...

I don't think so.
I don't have that kind of courage.

I don't even know if I'd call it courage.

Sounds more like foolishness to me....stand and stare at a bear that's no more than a first down and a five-yard penalty away from you?

Look, this is not a sermon about what Ben did during his summer vacation. I bring up the bear because my encounter up on that mountain—heart racing, mind spinning—I'd be less than honest if I said I had NO FEAR, and all of that, I think, has something to do with the scripture passages we heard this morning.

We are starting our fall sermon series this morning.
And our subject this fall is the book of Exodus.
Actually, not just the book of Exodus, but the story of the Exodus.

You know the Exodus story, right?
The story of Moses, and God freeing God's people, the Hebrews, from slavery in Egypt.

So why this story?

For starters, it is THE central salvation story of the Old Testament.

It's the story of the parting of the Red Sea to freedom. It's the story of the covenant that God made with God's people at Mt. Sinai, the Ten Commandments. It's the story of God leading God's people through the wilderness to the promised land.

It's a story that is referenced many times in the four Gospels. It's a story that would have shaped the faith of Jesus in significant ways when he was growing up.

And the reason I bring up that bear...is because of the way the story begins.

It doesn't begin with Moses.

It begins with five women, each of whom did something courageous in the face of Pharaoh's cruelty.

Do you remember those five women?

Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who defied Pharaoh's order to kill all the Hebrew boys, so whenever a boy was born to the Hebrew people, they said "let the boys live."

Then there's the mother of Moses.

And Miriam, the sister of Moses.

And Pharaoh's daughter, who rescues Moses and gives Moses his name.

Five women, all of whom are in some way responsible for keeping Moses alive.

So...I'm going to ask you to imagine 3 things in this sermon.

First thing:

Imagine with me...not that you're on a mountain, bumping into a bear...**but imagine that you're at the river, the Nile River, long ago.**

Take a good look at the people who go to the river that day.

Can you see Pharaoh's daughter?

She discovers this baby boy.

And he's not one of her people.

He's one of THEIR people.

She knows what her father does to THOSE people.

She has a decision to make.

Who knows what her father would do to her, if he finds out that his very own daughter decided to SAVE this baby boy.

Can you see the courage welling up in her heart?
Or how about the courage in Miriam's heart?

As Miriam, the sister of Moses, approaches the daughter of Pharaoh, with this clever plan to get her brother back to their mother...

Speaking of Moses' mother, let's take a look at her as well.

For three months, she's been hiding her boy. Oh, how she loves her boy, and one day, her boy is too big to hide anymore. So she builds a basket to float in the Nile, and she places her boy in the basket and places the basket in the river.

Think about that.
To let go of your child like that.
About what it takes to trust in God like that.

I LOVE that Exodus story.
I love that the Exodus begins with the courage of these five women, because I believe that their courage is contagious.

Do you believe that?
I believe that.

When we see someone move forward with faith in God, in the face of their fears, it helps us with our own fears.

I think you know what I mean.
Let me try to describe what I mean.

I recall last summer, the night before I was supposed to have my hip replaced. Up until that point, I felt good, I felt positive, I was ready to have the surgery.

But the night before, I suddenly got scared.
What if something goes wrong?
What if they put me under, and I don't wake up?
All sorts of scenarios went through my mind the night before my surgery.

So the next morning, when we checked into the hospital and they took me back to prep me, they did all the necessary stuff, and then the nurse left to get my wife so that she could come back and spend a couple minutes with me before I went into surgery.

And I remember during those two minutes, alone with my thoughts, someone I knew years ago came to mind. A young mother with two young children, she faced much more severe health problems than needing a new hip.

In her late 30s, she battled cancer for five years.
She had more surgeries than I recall.
She knew there would be no cure.

But she approached each day with a kind of faith and hope and courage that was astonishing to behold.

Spending time with her family.
Serving her church, at worship nearly every Sunday.
Advocating for those without health insurance in her country.

I thought to myself, good grief, Ben, get a grip.
If she can do all that she did...you can certainly do this.

Her courage was contagious.

Have you ever seen courage spread?
Move from one person to another person to another?
It's one of the reasons why belonging to a church is so important.

One of my preaching professors in seminary was a Baptist minister, Dr. Cleo LaRue. Dr. LaRue grew up in the Black church, and before Dr. LaRue became a professor at Princeton, he had many years of experience pastoring churches in Texas.

He writes:

“As a young twenty-year old pastor in my first church in Texas, I remember a family caught in a season of sustained adversity.

“A distraught mother, trying to hold her family together, lay desperately ill in the hospital after a bad car accident. Her husband was unemployed, her son was in jail, her daughter was pregnant out of wedlock, and her creditors were calling the hospital demanding that she pay something on her overdue accounts.”

Dr. LaRue says that he went to visit her in her hospital room early one morning, “and after a brief greeting she closed her eyes and stretched her hands toward me for a word of prayer.”

At which point, Dr. LaRue says, “I thought I should do something more than merely pray for her. I thought it my place to give her some sound spiritual advice about life. So I said to her, ‘Mozelle, I'm not going to ask God to move your mountain. I'm just going to ask God to give you the strength to climb.’

Then, he says, “This very sick woman immediately put her hands down and opened her eyes.

‘Wait a minute, little preacher,’ she said. ‘Don't you tie God's hands this morning. I'm not trying to climb over a mountain, I'm trying to get out from under one. If God wants to move my mountain, you let him.’”¹

I think that mother had it exactly right.
She knew where courage comes from.
Not from our strength. Not from our nature.
Courage comes from the character and nature of God.

A God whose ways are not our ways.
A God whose thoughts are not our thoughts.
A God whose imagination is so much broader, richer, deeper—
than what our tiny minds might hold.

So let me invite you to take a look at some other faces sometime today.

Not the faces of those five women.
But the faces of the people in this room.

This is one reason why I missed seeing you this summer.
When I look out at these faces here today, I don't see fear.
I see faith.

I see faith that has walked through grief.
Faith that has forgiven old wounds.
Faith that has sacrificed for new generations.

¹ As told by Dr. Cleo LaRue in his sermon, “The University of Adversity,” October 26, 2008, on Day 1, found at http://day1.org/1115-university_of_adversity.

Faith that has stood up for the voiceless.
 Faith that has worked for justice.
 Faith that has taken risks, to love those who are difficult to love.

In other words, what I see in this room is courage.

So let me ask you a question:
 At this moment in your life, what are you tempted to run from?
 What worry, what fear, did you bring with you?

While you're considering that question, there's a story from the Hebrew Midrash that I'd like for you to imagine. It's the second thing I'd like you to imagine today.

But let me pause.
 When I say Hebrew Midrash, do you know what I mean?

The Midrash are "stories and reflections of...rabbi scholars" that were composed over hundreds of years, and that help interpret a biblical text. In other words, when the details of a scriptural text were "a bit sparse," there's a tradition in Judaism in which rabbis, for centuries, "filled in the empty spaces with challenging ideas and tantalizing [tales]."

So...there's this story from the Midrash about what happened later in Exodus, when the Israelites reach the Red Sea.

The waters are in front of them, unparted.
 The Egyptians are behind them but catching up.
 And there's much anxiety.

And according to this story from the Midrash, "the leaders of the tribes of Israel all gathered at the water's edge, sat down, and argued with one another about who would go into the water first...Action was

needed, but the leaders did what they knew how to do and had a committee meeting instead...no decision was forthcoming and [their] fear grew and grew.

“Waiting for a decision no longer, Nashon, son of Amminidah, simply remembered why they were there and the promise that brought them there, so he stood up and began to walk into the water.

“As the story is told, he walked into the water up to his ankles and the waters did not part. He walked into the water up to his waist and the waters did not part. Up to his shoulders, up to his chin, and the waters did not part...As he took the step that would have put his nose under water, the waters parted.”²

In other words, Nashon’s courage became contagious.
And the same will be true for you.
Can you imagine that?

It’s the third thing I’d like for you to imagine.

Can you imagine taking that next step forward, in spite of your fear, even though you don’t what’s going to happen next?

I said I want you to imagine it, but I take that back.
Don’t imagine it.
Just do it.

Do you remember the second part of the charge that I typically offer each Sunday? Will you say it with me?

Go out into God’s world in peace...**have courage...**

Amen.

² Gil Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.