

“Protection from Mayhem”

Rev. Greg Watling
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Gaylord, Michigan
Sunday, March 26, 2023

Texts: John 4: 5-30, 39-42 and Exodus 17: 1-7

Sometimes I think I watch too much television. Titling a sermon with the catch phrase of an auto insurance commercial makes me think I may need help. But you’ve seen them, haven’t you? Nationwide is on your side. AAA now offers auto insurance (I thought they always did). Liberty, liberty, liberty...complete with an emu. And my personal favorite, “let us protect you from mayhem”, which is a Progressive Insurance ad. We all know that we need insurance. In fact, Michigan law requires that you have it on your car. Okay, but that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about how we sometimes think of God like an insurance company. You know, we use God to protect us from acts of God.

Terence Fretheim, in his commentary on the Exodus text, lays this out for us rather clearly. He uses the story of the temptation of Jesus to illustrate: “Jesus was asked by the devil to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple. After all, if he jumped, God would jump and not allow him to fall to his death.” There is a wilderness tradition that is also at work in the Exodus text which Jesus quotes to the devil at the temptation: “that would be forcing God’s hand, seeking to *make* God act in order to demonstrate the divine presence and power (see Luke 16: 30-31).”

Fretheim goes on, "This approach to God is often the characteristic of believers. I will not take special precautions in the use of automobiles or guns or on dangerous adventures. God will take care of me. I will not take out insurance [despite the creative ads or state law], God is my insurance policy. Such attitudes set God up for a test, holding God hostage, determining just how God is to show divine power. It places God in the role of servant, at the beck and call of one in any difficulty. Besides violating the goodness of God, it endangers the understanding of faith. It leads to such attitudes as this: God did not heal or protect you, because you didn't have enough faith. If you had, God would have acted. That is to put God to the test, demonstrating an inappropriate confidence that God will in fact intervene at the behest of one who has faith."

I don't know about you, but I'm glad I've insurance along the way. Despite my belief that I am a man of faith, I can assure you that hardship and calamity have affected my life, as I'm sure is true of yours. Rear-ended in an auto accident, a chimney fire in our home, some health issues, Cindy's accident years ago with someone who didn't have insurance, recovery from a home break-in...and the list goes on. Insurance can be a pain, it can be expensive, and it doesn't always do what it says it will do. It doesn't really protect you from the mayhem of life, but it does often help you pick up the pieces and move forward. Relying on God to fix your life without using the resources available to you doesn't make much sense to me. And while I believe that

God does help us through mayhem of every kind, God doesn't prevent it, and God alone does not restore it. God works in partnership with humanity to serve the needs of humanity. Going into life with blind faith alone won't turn out well.

On the other hand, in our story, the people have once again begun to complain. It makes sense as they've been wandering the desert. There are many reasons for their wandering, but one of them, I think, is that they needed to wander in order to mature. God didn't cause them to wander, but God uses the occasion to teach valuable lessons. In the final verse, the people have accused God and Moses of bringing them out into the desert to kill them. In this third of four complaints in the Exodus story, "they keep Moses' feet to the fire: Why did *you* bring us out of Egypt?" They wonder if Moses intends to kill them, stressing the children and the cattle this time.

It's interesting to note here that the double name given to the place where they are presently in the story. It is called Massah/Meribah, which "marks divine test as the basic memory associated with this story. These memories later haunt Israel. The names became a type for testing God: "you shall not put Yahweh you God to the test, as you tested him at Massah (you can look this up in Deuteronomy 6:16, Psalm 78: 18, 41 and 56; Psalm 81:7; and 95:9)." From Numbers 14:22 we learn that the people had tested God ten times, severely testing the divine patience. In addition, it is at this place that 'it went ill with Moses on their account'. You can see that in Psalm 106:32; Numbers 20:2-13; Deuteronomy 32:51.

Here's the point (and Fretheim makes it better than I do). The Bible does say that God can test Israel but not for Israel to test God. Testing has to do with putting God to the proof, that is, seeking a way in which God can be coerced to act or show himself. It is to set God up, to try to force God's hand in order thereby to determine concretely whether God is really present or not. Israel's testing of God consisted in this: if we are to believe that God is really present, then God must show us in a concrete way by making water materialize. It is to make one's belief in God contingent upon such a demonstration. Here's the key phrase: ***It is, in essence, an attempt to turn faith into sight (emphasis mine).***

Our whole theme for Lent is about having conviction in things unseen. There can be no doubt that there was nothing wrong with the people wanting and needing water in the desert. Duh. It was the direct challenge to what God had planned all along in the Exodus. How quickly humans forget all that God does do for us...all the ways God has protected us from mayhem...all the ways God has provided for our needs...all the ways God has loved us through pain and suffering. Our memory is so short that at the first sign of trouble we forget our past, and threaten God with our faith if God doesn't provide what we say we need right now. Charlatans around the world have advocated if we say the right words, and act just right, then God protects us from all harm. Really? Isn't that the same logic used against Jesus on the cross? "If you are the Son of God, bring yourself down from there?"

If you are God, then you must do this for me? Don't misunderstand...God is okay with our questioning, our doubts, our hurts and our struggles. God can take it when we blame God for the bad things that happen in life. God fully accepts that we cry out when we suffer knowing that sometimes life gets hard and we need to lament. There is ample biblical tradition for lamenting.

However, when things don't go our way, how can we stop blaming ourselves thinking we are unfaithful? How can we look for signs of God acting in the world without demanding they be what we want, when we want it? How can we trust in God who acts in ways that are often mysterious to us? How can we remain faithful when sometimes life puts so many hurdles before us?

Faith is conviction about things that are unseen. Faith can easily be tried and tested. And yet, do we really believe that God would harm us like the Israelites did? For God desires our well-being, and blesses us in ways we often can't imagine...or even when we do see blessing, we often have such short memories.

God, forgive us our shortness of memory, and our constant testing of your faithfulness. Amen.