

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 13, 2020

Leadership You Can Count On

Exodus 13:17-22

"Savior, like a shepherd lead us, / Much we need Thy tender care." That prayer through song should always be on our lips, but especially during a time like this. Seasons of disruption and distress can become a time for recognizing the limits and inadequacy of our own resources. We look beyond ourselves for provision and guidance. We realize that if we're going to navigate through this pandemic and arrive at a better place, then we need direction. We need to be led.

Relying on God's leadership has always been essential in the life of God's people. We see it in today's text from Exodus. The Israelites have left Egypt. They're getting their first taste of freedom. But freedom doesn't mean being on their own, at liberty to choose whatever destination they desire, as well as the route to get there. They're still God's people, destined for the place that God has promised. And in order for that promise to be fulfilled, they'll need their divine shepherd. "Savior, like a shepherd lead us, / Much we need Thy tender care."

Strangely, God starts out by taking his people the long way around, so as to avoid battle with the Philistines. This isn't just a matter of physical safety. It's also part of God's strategic thinking. God says to himself, "If my people leave bondage and go straight into combat, they might change their mind about this whole exodus thing and want to go back to Egypt, to what feels more like stability and security." God knows that his people might choose a known past over an unknown future.

But that's often what leadership means within the biblical story. It means God moving his people forward, further into the freedom of living under his sovereign love. The route may often seem out of the way, dangerous, and disruptive, but the course is being charted by a God who is reliable and trustworthy. No matter how fuzzy the future, there's clarity about God's faithfulness.

That's what today is about in our church's ongoing story. This is the sixty-second anniversary of Grace Baptist Church. For more than six decades, our congregation has been on a journey of faith under the Lord's guidance. Every journey is filled with events, episodes, and experiences that help define the covenant community and its mission. So it is in today's text, where we're given what amounts to a journey report. This report brings the past and the present into lively conversation. It recalls how God has led, and what that means for the territory that's still ahead.

If we were to compose our own journey report of where our congregation is currently located in its story, I wonder what we would include in the compilation. How would we narrate, especially for future generations, what it was like to travel into and through this period in our church's life? We might tell stories of how we endured some captivity of our own, on lockdown at home, while the doors of the Lord's house were closed. We might tell stories of worshiping online until we were able to return and social distance in the pews.

We might tell stories about the sad experience of having to close our day care center. We might tell stories of vigilance in staying connected to one another, offering Christian encouragement and care. We might tell stories about the challenges of school, work, employment, finances, family, and social division within our nation.

We might even try to document some of these experiences and preserve them for future generations. What if we were to prepare a time capsule of our congregation's current life? What objects would we put in the container that would be typical of the present time? A mask. A bottle of hand sanitizer. A copy of our church's COVID-19 guidelines. A copy of one of the signs asking you not to sit in this pew. A portable offering box, though that probable wouldn't fit. A webcam. A thumb drive with audio recordings of the worship service.

Hopefully anyone who opened the capsule and listened to those recordings would hear us proclaiming and celebrating God's faithfulness, especially on a Sunday like this. And God's faithfulness includes God's leadership. We haven't made it this far in our journey because of our own fortitude and sense of direction. We've made it here because of God's provision and guidance. Our present is made possible by the Lord's reliability and trustworthiness.

And our present is always tied to our past. Notice that in today's text, Moses carries the bones of Joseph on the journey. At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph insisted, and formalized it into an oath, that his bones must be taken up with the departing Israelites and carried to the land of promise. This act is a testimony to Joseph's faith and the durability of God's promises. It's also a reminder of the intergenerational shape of faith. In other words, the generation that was emancipated from Egypt was not the first generation in the larger story. There were others before them who lived with belief and hope in the God who had originally called Abraham and promised his blessing.

So as we celebrate our church's anniversary, we don't just rejoice in those of us who are here at year sixty-two. We also remember and give thanks for all those who have been part of our congregation's life and mission during all the preceding years. Just because we're the present generation, living during extraordinary pandemic times, doesn't mean getting so focused on the here and now that we lose sight of the faithful ones who have come before us. Their work isn't a relic of the past, preserved only in albums of church photos. Just like us, they lived through seasons of sorrow and periods of prosperity in our church. And together with us, they comprise a living fellowship of those who stand upon the promises of God.

This fellowship extends beyond our own congregation. On an occasion like this, it's easy to lose sight of how our congregation is just one small but significant piece of the global church, the worldwide community of all those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. You saw some of this earlier in our Missions Moment as we began our week of prayer for our partnership with other churches in the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware. And at the local level, you don't have to go far to recognize that we're part of something much more expansive than just our own assembly. Just across the way sits Shiloh United Methodist Church, which recently sent us a letter rejoicing in their 185th anniversary. That's three times older than us! Next Sunday, September 20, they'll gather via Zoom and Facebook Live for a celebratory service to praise God for all the work he has done through their ministries. They'll give thanks for God's leadership across nearly two centuries.

Sometimes God uses the witness and wisdom of past generations of believers to encourage us and guide us forward. He takes the testimony of those who have preceded us and uses that to pull us further into the future that he has promised through Christ.

In addition to using the faithful from the past, God also uses fellow believers in the present to guide us forward. The Lord provides leadership for us through individuals in the congregation, here and now. That's one of the reasons why the Nominating Committee's work of seeking individuals to serve in our church's ministry roles and responsibilities is so important. This is more than just an annual edition of the church's want ads or a kingdom version of Indeed.com. This is about discerning who will be leading us in the various pieces of our mission.

Remember that leaders in the church are individuals whom God calls to enable the people to make the journey from their deliverance in Christ to their destination in Christ. And the route to this destination in Christ goes through the wilderness. Before we possess the promised land we must pass through the desert. So church leaders are essentially wilderness guides. They're summoned to help get God's people to where they're going. And we need that, especially in this season of disruption and distress created by the coronavirus. During an experience like the present, people in the church look to their leaders. They rely upon those whom God has put out front to help the congregation navigate through all the challenges, risks, and opportunities.

What matters most is that God is out front, ahead of his people, guiding them on their way. In the case of his people Israel, he went before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The Lord's leadership was 24/7. He didn't bring his people out of bondage and then abandon them to their own sense of direction. He didn't tell them to call him if they got off course. He didn't suggest that they experiment with various routes and discover their own way. No, God showed them the way. God charted the way. God himself became their way.

In her book, *God's Guidance: A Slow and Certain Light*, Elisabeth Elliott tells about two travelers who stopped by to see her, all loaded with equipment for a journey into the rain forest east of the Andes. They didn't ask for any advice. All they wanted was a few phrases they could use in their conversations with the Indians. She writes: "Sometimes we come to God as the two adventurers came to me—confident and, we think, well-informed and well equipped. But has it occurred to us that with all our accumulation of stuff, something is missing?" She suggests that we often ask God for too little. "We know what we need—a yes or no answer, please, to a simple question. Or perhaps a road sign. Something quick and easy to point the way. What we really ought to have is the Guide himself. Maps, road signs, a few useful phrases are things, but infinitely better is someone who has been there before and knows the way."

For 62 years, we as a congregation, generations past and present, have been following a Lord and Savior who knows the way, and who is the way. For us the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire come in a variety of forms, as God's holy presence shows up in remarkable ways. In particular, the Lord has blessed us with the gift of his Word and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. And along with these, we have the gift of experience, with the wisdom and understanding it brings. The gift of an enduring witness from those who've come before us. The gift of leaders in the present, men and women who not only walk with us but ahead of us, as a sign that the leadership of the Lord is leadership you can count on. Thanks be to God, who guides us on the way.