

Stubborn Ways
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
September 13, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

First Reading Psalm 9:15-20
Second Reading Judges 2:16-19

We pick up the story of God and God's people this morning where we left it last week.

One of the highpoints of the story of God and the chosen nation of Israel is the point at which they are gathered on the border of Canaan. Just before they cross the Jordan River into the promised land, Moses gathers Israel to remind them of God's steadfast love and call to live in God's ways.

We heard part of that great speech last week and again this morning in our call to worship. Never let the story of our deliverance by God's hand be forgotten, Moses says. Teach it to your children through the generations, so they will know why Israel follows God's guidance.

"We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand God brought us out of there in order to bring us in, to give us the land promised to our ancestors If we diligently observe God's commandment, we will be in the right."

From that point, things go well for Israel, for a time. With God's help, Israel settles Canaan as recorded in the book of Joshua, named for the man who led Israel after Moses. Israel stays more than busy conquering and dividing the promised land and hardly has time for anything else, including staying far from God.

When Joshua's days are almost over and Israel is settled across the land, Joshua reminds the people one more time: Revere the Lord and serve the Lord with sincerity and in your faithfulness: put away the gods your ancestors served back where we came from.

But it didn't take. As we heard in the verses from opening chapters of the next book in the story, Israel "lusted after other gods and bowed down before them They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways." (Judges 2)

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It was one year ago this month that the practices of Wall Street helped trigger what we now call “the great recession.” By now, millions of words have been written or broadcast in an effort to analyze what went wrong. Too many Americans got used to living beyond their means, so they got addicted to credit. Too many banks extended credit to borrowers they shouldn’t have. And Wall Street invented all sorts of exotic ways to bundle and sell the debt, getting paid for its services and convincing regulators that risk had been largely eliminated from the system.

By now, after so much hardship and real suffering by those at the lowest rungs of our economic ladder, you would think we had learned our lesson. You’d think we know by now that we need to get back to basics in our financial system, that something that seems too good to be true probably is.

We may learn that lesson yet ... and let go of our own stubborn ways. But then there is evidence that we haven’t. Last week, for example, the New York Times reported that the Wall Street wizards have now invented ways to acquire, package and sell investments based on death payments from insurance policies.

Ill and elderly policy holders pre-sell their settlements and investors gamble on how long the policy holders will live. It’s a \$26 trillion market. Some firms are ramping up new divisions to get into this business as fast as possible.

“We’re hoping to get a herd stampeding after the first offering,” said one investment banker.

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Recently, a leading Christian magazine¹ asked several pastors, scholars and other experts to reflect on what it called “Theological dividends: Lessons from the economic downturn.” What have we as a nation and a people learned, the magazine asked? And how can we use our faith as a compass to avoid repeating our errors?

So, what did the pastors, scholars and experts conclude? Well, opinions varied.

The problem, as one ethicist wrote, was that capitalism ran amok, as it tends to do without proper government regulation. Another wrote that America’s prosperity “was an utter illusion, built not on production of basic goods and services but on debt.” That debt was too easily extended by lenders trying to make fast money in an economy that is too

¹ Christian Century, July 28 edition cover story

focused on making money at any cost, rather than lending relationships built on trust and work that honors God, the neighbor and creation.

Not so fast, wrote economist. All that financial imagination and innovation was just part of the natural cycle of how we Americans create opportunity, expand our economy and broaden prosperity. It's just that things went a bit too far. But don't worry, this author wrote, things will be back to normal soon and we will all be better off for this experience.

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Who is right in this debate?

I don't claim to have the expertise to know. And, as important as this all is to our city, still one of the nation's largest banking centers, you don't really come here on Sunday mornings to hear and think about such things. You come to hear what word the Lord has for you today. We come to pray for the perspective and strength to abandon other gods and put aside our own stubborn ways.

Like Israel about to enter the promised land, we are called to remember that we cannot end our slavery without God's help. Moses knew the value of calling God's people to stop and remember what God did for God's people. Joshua, too.

But how often in our secular culture do we hear that looking back is for losers?

Society says keep pushing forward. The name of the game is productivity. Get more done in less time, they say. Press forward. It's non-negotiable. And in one way we all resign ourselves to believing that life really is about the future and not the past.

There was a time in Israel's history when remembering was a fundamental element of its economy. Every seven years, Israel recognized the Sabbatical Year. Planters let the land rest, any fruit or produce the trees yielded was left for the poor or for wild animals. Creditors released borrowers from their debt. Slaves were freed from their owners. Then, after every seventh Sabbatical year, which equaled every 49 years, all land was returned to its ancestral owners.

All of this was a way of remembering that all we have comes from God and all should be returned to God from time to time. Experts say that's impossible in today's economy.

Nations, markets and trading exchanges are too intertwined. Our national and personal debt is sliced up and spread around the world. Most of our national debt, for example, is in the hands of the Chinese government, and something tells me that they aren't just going to let us off the hook.

Perhaps what we might hope and pray for, here in America, if not necessarily with other countries, is a sabbatical or even a jubilee of the heart. The ideas behind both of those traditions were release and redemption as acts of remembrance of how God released and redeemed Israel. For followers of Christ, the ultimate release and redemption came later on the cross, giving the world access to a debt-free life everlasting.

What if, in response, we did release our debtors, as we pray each week in the Lord's prayer. What if we wiped the slate clean and started over again? Where might we start?

It probably doesn't take us long to identify those whom we owe a debt of forgiveness. Can some. For example, reconcile with those who may hold an opposing view on how to fix health care? Can others of us reconcile with Representative Joe Wilson, who drew the ire of many Americans this week when he called the President a liar while the President was speaking to a joint session of Congress?

Or, as we have just marked the eighth anniversary of 9/11, perhaps we begin with our relationship as Americans with Muslims – even those who would want to harm us? Let's start all over with them.

Now, what are we feeling? Do we see how inadequate we are for the job? Do we see how utterly impossible it would be by ourselves? Do we see how utterly dependent we are on God ... to locate the line where justice should end and forgiveness should begin ... and then to actually forgive?

All of a sudden, the financial debt that has entrapped our nation and its economy looks small when compared to the emotional and relational debts we owe others. All of a sudden, the grace and forgiveness our God calls for us to practice toward each other looks impossible to achieve.

And we are like those whom the psalmist described in our first reading:

"The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught," and the psalmist continues, "let the nations know that they are only human."

Here the psalmist echoes the sentiment we heard in our passage from the Book of Judges. We are only human, we are a stubborn people, stuck in our stubborn ways.

From time to time we are given a figure like the judges of Israel, who would remind the people that they cannot accomplish anything without God. Perhaps for us it is an experience or an unexpected event or a milestone in life. It may be unexpected joy or it may be the greatest crisis of our life.

Either way, God is steadfast. God celebrates our joy or, when we groan out loud as the nation of Israel did when it strayed from God time and again, the Lord is moved to pity and rescues us.

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We don't know yet when this recession will end and release us from its hardships. And it may take a generation to know whether we have learned any lessons from our shared mistakes that helped cause it. And we can't count the years until the next sabbatical or jubilee year, when the slate is wiped clean in the name of God.

One of the more popular modern images for describing the potential of this moment in our nation's history is a big red button with the word 'reset' on it. In this technological age, perhaps that is our way of expressing hope for a new beginning.

But the symbol that stands above all others is the one affixed to the wall behind me, the cross. It was there, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that God released us. It was there Christ showed us what he meant by forgiving debtors. It is there, we are called to remember that we are mere mortals, stubborn to the end, but also redeemed and called by God to remember and to live in response, with jubilee in our hearts.

Amen.