

Time to Make a Difference – Part 5
“Time to Face Our Fears with Faith”

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OT 28A-17

Exodus 32: 1-14

Philippians 4: 1-9

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We are in the final week of this five-part series—“Time to Make a Difference.” And I know, some may be thinking, “Whew. It’s about time.” But if you were here back on the second Sunday of September, you’ll recall the series began with an exploration of Paul’s letter to the Romans, in which he proclaims loudly and clearly that “*Now* is the time. Not tomorrow... not years from now... *now* is the time salvation *is* at hand. So don’t miss the boat!” he says. “Right now, God is as close to us as our very breath, inviting us to participate not only in the transformation of our own lives, but in the transformation of the whole world.”

So for weeks now, we’ve been exploring a variety of ways in which you and I and disciples today are invited to seek transformation. Your transformation. My transformation. This community’s transformation. The world’s transformation. Now is the time to live faith *fully* by seeking to transform old ways built on false hopes into a new life built on the promises of God who invites us to be coworkers in the kingdom.

Now... is the time to make a difference! It’s what we’re called to do, Towson Presbyterian Church.

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This morning, though, we aren’t reading from Romans. We’re reading from Philippians—perhaps Paul’s favorite church community—as well as Exodus. We read from both of these texts last week as well.

So some may recall that the Hebrews were not having an easy time of it. Ever since they set foot beyond Egypt’s oppressive borders, life had been hard... incredibly hard as they made their way through the wilderness in pursuit of the Promised Land—the land God had promised to their ancestors Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all their descendants.

But through it all, through each treacherous step of the journey, God had been with them. During the day, God would go before them in a pillar of cloud. And by night, God could be seen as a pillar of fire. Day in and day out, God would lead Israel... until they reached the spot we find them in our first lesson this morning. At Mount Sinai... the great and holy site where God re-established a covenant with Israel... where God once again promised to be Israel’s God, and they’d be God’s people... and where God gave Israel rules to live by... rules that would enable Israel to keep God at the center of their communal and individual lives.

In specifics, the whole re-covenanting thing worked something like this. While all the Israelites camped at the bottom of the mountain, God hovered atop the peak in a cloud. And occasionally, God would call Moses, asking him to climb to the top of the mountain so God could speak with him, giving him instructions to give to the people. So time and again, Moses

would hear God call, climb to the top of the mountain, enter the cloud, get God's instructions, and then go back down the mountain to relay the message to the Israelites.

First, God could have given instructions on how to have the people consecrated—blessed—in an official sort of way.

Then, God called Moses up to share what we know today as the 10 commandments. Whether or not you know them all, for purposes of this morning it's important to remind ourselves of the first two: 1) Have no other gods except for the one and only God Almighty... and 2) have no idols... worship nothing other than God Almighty.

And this rhythm continued. God would call Moses up, and the people would then wait for Moses to come back down with the word of God.

But amid all of Moses' climbs and descents, eventually something incredibly strange occurred. Once again, God called Moses to the top of the mountain, where the divine cloud hovered. But this time, Exodus says the cloud of God appeared like it was a devouring fire from the perspective of the Israelites down at the bottom of the mountain. So when Moses entered the cloud this time, it looked to the people like he was walking into a fire.

But that's not all. Exodus also says that this time, Moses was atop the mountain not for an afternoon or a couple days... but 40 days and 40 nights. For 40 days and 40 nights, God gave Moses instructions regarding all sorts of things... like the ark of covenant... and the tabernacle... and burnt sacrifices.

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Meanwhile, back down at the base of the mountain... all the Israelites knew was that Moses had seemed to walk into a fire, and hadn't come out of it yet.

Understandably... after a few days came and went without any sign of Moses, they grew concerned. After a couple weeks and still no Moses... their concern turned to worry. And after a couple more weeks, their worry escalated into outright fear.

Fear that Moses wasn't coming back down. Fear he'd been devoured by that fire. Fear they were now on this wilderness journey all by themselves. Fear that if they were to make it out of the wilderness alive... if they were ever going to make it to this supposed Promised Land... it was going to be up to them and them alone.

It was, really, a fear we all share—fear that life is ultimately up to us. That our security and success rest solely upon our own shoulders.

Eventually, the Israelites couldn't stand it any longer. They turned to Aaron—Moses' brother—demanding he do something about this mess they were in.

And, fearful himself, Aaron obliged, gathering everybody's gold and melting it down in order to create this golden calf. But that's not all. He also had them build an altar before it, where they offered burnt offerings and sacrifices to it... actually worshipping the thing... this golden calf... this manmade idol!

Commandment #1—out the window. Commandment #2—disgraced. Their brand-new covenant with God, seemingly destroyed beyond repair.

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Now, granted... 40 days and nights is a long time to sit at the base of a mountain and wait for your leader to come back down. Surely, we can understand their fear. Fear that the miracles have run dry. Fear that life is now up to them and them alone.

But to worship a golden calf? An idol?

How could they have lost faith so fast?

How could they have forgotten so quickly? After all the faithfulness God had already shown them? Their deliverance from Egypt? The water in the desert? The manna and quails in the wilderness?

I mean, God had just promised them that God would be their God and they would forever be God's people! Didn't they trust in God's promise to provide all that they would ever need?

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(Preaching from table)

Now, you and me and Christians everywhere, we recall God's very covenant here—at this table—where we celebrate the gifts of God for the people of God in Jesus Christ. For here, we celebrate the bread and cup of a new covenant, in which God promises to be our God, and we God's people. Here, we encounter the same God of the Israelites now God calling us to trust in the gifts of God grace symbolized here in bread and a cup.

But do we? Do we trust in God's grace symbolized here in bread and the cup for our security? Do we prioritize the way of this grace first in our lives?

Or... when push comes to shove... do we trust more in Almighty Dollar that purchased this bread?

If forced to choose but one, on what do we rely? If we're being truly honest about what we cherish most, friends, what does our heart seek?

Do we seek to follow the God of grace, or the god of something else?

(Back to pulpit)

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Truth is, it's easy to look back at the Israelites and condemn their lack of faith... Condemn their idolatry.

But just like Israel, we have fears. Lots and lots of fears. Fears that tend to lead us not towards God... but away from God, and the way to which God has called us.

Chief among these fears for the vast majority in our capitalistic society is the fear of not having enough. Not enough in the savings. Not enough for our kids' education. Not enough for retirement? Not enough for... you fill in the blank.

But it's also so much more than this. We fear creation's wrath wreaking havoc throughout the Gulf of Mexico and the fires in California. We fear yet more gun violence killing innocents in our own land... and war continuing abroad... and threats being lobbed between nations—including our own.

And as we've been exploring these past five weeks... there are also more intimate fears calling out within us. Like our fears of not measuring up. Fears of disease and our bodies breaking down. Fear of losing someone we love. Fear of change and a future we cannot control. And these are really just the proverbial tip of our list of fears.

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But please know... please know there is nothing wrong with having fears. Every human has fears. Having faith does not make one fearless. Nor does having fear making one faithless.

But faith and fear... they do have an interesting relationship. Far too much of the time, our fears cause us to turn from faith. I mean, after 40 days Israel was scared enough to worship a metal cow. **Yet what we find in Scripture, time and time again, is a God who not only understands our fears, but who yearns for us to face them, trusting God enough to help us through the very things we fear that we might find fullness of life on the other side.**

Here's what I mean.

Afraid of not having enough... God calls us to give our money away and uncover the difference our generosity can make for others and for ourselves.

Afraid of being counted among the outcast... God calls us to stand with those no one else will stand with and so uncover the amazing difference unity can make in this world.

Afraid of not measuring up... of being judged or deemed inadequate... God calls us to throw away every last earthly yardstick once and for all in order to rest in what it means to be claimed full of worth by God.

Afraid of letting go of that long held-grudge... God calls us to forgive and see the difference forgiveness can make.

Afraid of losing our place of privilege in this patriarchal world... God calls us listen to the pains of those who've long been systemically discriminated against and see what difference understanding can make.

Afraid of the effects of climate change upon our children and children's children... God calls us to care for creation now and see the difference our own, personal stewardship can have on the world.

Afraid that tomorrow is unknown... fearful of what we can't control... fearful of what you believe God is asking of you... God calls you to trust that no matter what comes... God will be with you!

For as Paul says so beautifully in his letter to the Philippians, as people of faith, we *can* face all our fears in this world because the one thing we need not ever fear is the absence of God.

Which means we are free to make a difference in this world, friends, by refusing to let our fears get the better of us... and instead, choosing to face our fears with faith. Knowing that God is with us. Knowing that God is as close to us as our very breath. Knowing that God is inviting us, if we're but willing, to join in the dance of transformation. Your transformation. My transformation. This community's transformation. The world's transformation.

The time is now... Towson Presbyterian Church. We are called to make a difference. Amen.