

## **HOW ARE WE GOING TO GET BY?**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

September 21, 2008

Scripture: Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

It's been quite a week on Wall Street. Nothing since the Great Depression has so depressed the American public as has the fall of great financial institutions this week. The Bible, ever full of uncomplicated answers, might have been helpful if we had only heeded its simple advice earlier, like the familiar, "The love of money is the root of all evil." Or, Exodus 22:25, "If you lend money ... you shall not exact interest..." Even Ben Franklin had a word of wisdom to offer less complicated economic times, Poor Richard's Almanac, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." But that's all water under the bridge now, and instead we are stuck with getting our bearings in this changed economic environment in which we are living.

And maybe the two stories that we have just read from scripture can shed some light on the question on the mind of just about everybody here today, "How are we going to get by?"

The first story is an ancient story, a defining story that takes us all the way back to the time when our people were nomadic, wandering the wilderness of Egypt. And of course the question foremost on their mind as soon as they had gotten over the giddy excitement of no longer being slaves under Egypt's thumb, no longer feeling the lash of Pharaoh's masters, no longer sweating and heaving with the work of making bricks and mortar for Pharaoh's public works projects was a concern for their bellies.

They had packed everything that they could when they left Egypt and loaded it onto their backs and carried it in bags, and stuffed it under their shirts, and smuggled on their carts everything possible that was valuable. So it wasn't as if they had nothing, it's just that after they had eaten what they had of the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and the trail mix, and the bottles of Evian that they carried, the babies started crying, and the small kids were asking "Are we there yet?" and "When are we going to eat?" Even the adults were thinking that at least when they were back in Egypt they had some soup and water a couple of times a day.

It wasn't much, of course, some old roots and a few leaves boiled in water with a lot of seasoning and some bread, but at least it was something. There in the desert they had nothing. "How are we going to get by?" they asked Moses. "We'd have been better off staying in Egypt." And as sometimes happens; they launched into a revisionist version of their life back in the old days, under Pharaoh's regime. They fondly remembered the abundance of food that they had had, and the weekends watching football on their HDTV screens, the delicious popcorn at the movie theater, and the cold drinks on the veranda at sunset, the leisurely pace of life back there in Egypt when they were slaves.

So they complained to Moses about the new conditions that confronted them in the desert as unemployed nomads. And Moses and Aaron, listened, and said, "Don't blame us, this was God's idea, not ours." At which point, God in exasperation sprinkled with pity told Moses "All right, already! Enough with the whining!" God would provide quail at night and manna in the morning for the starving Israelites, meat and bread for the journey.

And sure enough that night the ground was covered with quail, and the people had their fill of meat. And when the morning came, the rain fell and the mist carried with it the manna that God had promised, a double portion on Fridays so that they would not have to gather or bake on the Sabbath.

And you would think that this would be just the encouragement that they would need, the answer to their question, "How are we going to get by?" But all it took was one look at the

mana; gooey, chewy substance that it was, kind of tasteless and thin, and they asked the obvious question, “What’s this? What’s this stuff? This is the bread of heaven? How can we get by on this?”

The other story that is assigned for today by the lectionary is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, another story about people worried about having enough and envying those who get more than enough, whatever *enough* is considered to be.

It seems there was a landowner who needed some day laborers, and he went out early in the morning and hired some workers for the usual daily wage. Of course there was a mistake made at that point. No contract, no statement of hours worked and pay due. Just the word of the owner that he would pay what was right. Now that was at 9:00 in the morning.

About noon the vineyard owner realized he had more work than he first thought, so he went back out again and hired some workers and brought them back to the vineyard where they began to labor. Again about 3:00 in the afternoon, he did the same, went out and hired some workers to pick grapes and trim the vines. And about an hour before quitting time, 5:00 in the afternoon, he needed some workers to load the baskets onto the trucks and drive them up to the distillery. So he hired some more workers. And they worked an hour or so.

When the time came to settle accounts, the workers all lined up for their pay. The ones who were hired last were reimbursed a hundred dollars for an hour’s work! That was a full day’s wage.

Well, the word spread down the line that the owner was a very generous man, and a great guy to work for, and they started doing the math. If the ones who were hired at 5:00 o’clock got paid a hundred dollars, and those who had started at the crack of dawn had put in 8 hours, well, eight times a hundred... and they began to feel pretty good about their employer. But hold on!

When the workers that started at three in the afternoon were paid a hundred dollars (the same as the 5:00 workers) the word spread down the line and they started to grumble. After all they had worked two more hours than the latest hires. They felt they were due \$300. And they complained.

Finally, the workers who hired on at 9:00 were paid a hundred dollars as well and they didn’t like it one bit. They started to get out their cell phones and call the union office and they pumped up the inflatable rat! And they called the cops to come down and quell the disturbance.

Bait and switch the workers argued. Arbitrary wages. There’s nothing right about it, they said. But it depends on who you’re asking. The laborers who started early were paid what they agreed to, a day’s wages, vague as that may have been, but they got what they agreed to be paid. For all those who worked fewer hours, the fewer hours they worked, the greater the kindness that was shown them, and perhaps the deeper the appreciation. It was, after all the decision of the owner to pay what he wanted, and no one got less than was promised. It may have been uneven pay but it was the pay they agreed to. And it was enough on which to live.

But before you get stuck on the inequity of the pay, it’s important to understand that the parable is not about labor practices in the Middle East in the first century, nor about gullible workers or capricious landowners. Its moral is not, “Let the laborer beware,” and it has nothing to do with running a good vineyard. It’s a parable about the way it is in the kingdom of heaven. Remember it begins, “The kingdom of heaven is like this...” And what is the kingdom like? It is a place where God is God and we are not, and no one is left without enough, a place where a controversial grace abounds.

In both the story of the manna from heaven and the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, there is a lot of grumbling. People are not happy about the unequal distribution.

Nomadic Israel in the time of Moses is hungry, and they want meat and potatoes, but what they get is quail and manna. The workers in the vineyard are angry because there is too much inequality in pay, or perhaps too much equality, depending on your point of view. And that's a problem. Those who labor longer don't get more than those who have come late to the field. Thinly veiled in that story is the unhappiness of the Jewish Christians who are upset that the Gentiles are being included in the covenant, newcomers, late arrivals, and they are being rewarded with a Messiah that they have not longed for as long as Israel has.

But be that as it may, the issue at stake in both parables hits us in this week of financial instability and threatened livelihood as stories that address the issue of how we are going to get by in times when we are not sure we have enough.

How our focus does change! Two weeks ago we couldn't get pigs and lipstick off the 24 hour news channels, this week what sells toothpaste on those same channels is the financial peril of the nation. We can't seem to get enough of hearing about losing house and home and job and accumulated savings and people's 401K's being gutted and the anxiety of the Street, both Main Street and Wall Street, over the collapse of financial giants.

It's serious business, let's make no mistake. I saw the gloom on the faces of the Wall Street folks this week who are on our board of trustees. It's an anxious time. And almost none of us, even the sixty year olds of us, know what it is like to live in such an uneasy financial time as this.

I can remember as a kid older people who had lived through the Great Depression, and how they saved every scrap of paper, and every rubber band, and every nail they ever pulled out of a board. They saved and hoarded things because they believed that the world could collapse on them once again without warning as it had on them before and whatever it is that they were saving might be in short supply.

I always thought they lived too much out of fear and too little out of faith. But for the first time, I am starting to appreciate that they were not crazy, they were just anxious.

Jesus once said, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink, or what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these..."

O you of little faith... Seek first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness," he said, "and all these things will be added to you as well."<sup>1</sup>

I suppose if you're Jesus, if all you have to your name is a tunic and a pair of sandals, or if you travel like the Queen and carry no money in your purse, in other words you are either so poor or so rich that money is immaterial to you, then you can say what Jesus said, "Do not be anxious about your life." But the truth is that in good times and in bad we are always anxious to a greater or lesser degree about money and whether we have enough, and where we can get more, and who's getting more than we are, and how are we going to make ends meet when money is scarce. We are always worried about how we are going to get by.

The truth of the matter is that all this worry, *the worry*, helps us not one iota. Jesus warned us about that too. "Can any of you by your worrying," he asked, "add a single hour to your span of life?"

This past week my older brother Don who has been fighting lung cancer for the past seven months, was told that he has a very short time to live. A few weeks at most. I am not sure that he fully understands the situation, the cancer is in his brain now and is affecting his cognitive ability. It has also spread to the part of the brain that regulates hunger. So his brain, all of the

time, is telling him that he is not hungry, and therefore he has no desire to eat. It's a cruel trick that the cancer is playing on him.

Don and my sister-in-law have been caught, like so many other people, in the problems of a mortgage taken out in a better time when things were more optimistic and hopeful. He's not a victim of the sub-prime problem, but the selling value of his house on the market is less than the debt that he owes nonetheless.

Somehow in the midst of both the health and the financial crisis that my brother and sister-in-law are facing, they have become clear about what's important in these, his latter days, even if the language of faith is not their most fluent vocabulary. They know that their lives are being sustained by God's love and lived in God's grace, because that's all that's left to them. That's about all there is for them.

My brother, who is not a particularly religious man in a formal way, told me some time ago that he is not afraid of dying, that death, at the very least is a release from suffering, and if the promises of faith are true, then there is something better for him beyond this life. In either case, there is nothing of which to be afraid.

I think he's got it. I think it will be enough for him, enough for all of us really, reduced to the essentials as we are, to trust that the grace of God will see us through, to sustain us all our days and to watch over us through the coming darkness.

The God who has given us life promises to walk with us not just in the sunlight of high noon when faith comes easy and all's right with the world, but also in the darkness of midnight, when it's hard to see the way forward, when the path is uncertain, and the road is unknown.

There have been a few times in my ministry that I have felt a lot like the doctor in the boxer's corner must feel, to see the beaten fighter stagger his way to the stool and collapse at the end of the round. And I look at the wounds and salve the cuts and dab the swelling and apply the styptic to the bleeding, so that when the bell rings we'll be ready to get back on our feet and get out there one more time.

This feels like that kind of Sunday to me. How are we going to make it through, we wonder? How are we going to get by?

We are going to make it through, by the grace of God, you and I, by the grace of God we will get by.

Marilynne Robinson in her book *Gilead*, has the Reverend John Ames reflect some thoughts about his small Iowa congregation in the hard times it knew in the 30's and 40's and 50's. Ames says,

I was thinking about the things that had happened here [in this town] just in my lifetime – the droughts and the influenza and the Depression and three terrible wars. It seems to me now we never looked up from the trouble we had just getting by to put the obvious question, that is, to ask what it was the Lord was trying to make us understand.”<sup>2</sup>

Well, here we are today in September of 2008 in a financial crisis, as bad as the country has ever had to face in contemporary time and it might do us well to look up from the trouble we have and ask the obvious question, what the Lord is trying to make us understand.

If the lessons we have read today are any clue, what the Lord is trying to make us understand is that we are going to get by.

How? Precisely by *the grace of God*, we are going to get by.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:25-33, sel. The translation is a combination of the KJV and NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Marilynne Robinson, **Gilead**. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004. 233.