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 Exodus 13:17-14:4
 Eighteenth Message
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LEAD ME IN THE DESERT

SERIES: A THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

Are you fearful in new situations and environments? I was extremely shy when I was growing up. Faced with new situations, I often was assaulted with fears. Yet in those times when I felt most alone and vulnerable, I found myself praying most fervently for God to lead me. As a result, I experienced his presence more than ever before. In our text today, the narrator picks up the account of the journey (Exod 12:38) of the Israelites, a saga that was interrupted by reflections and liturgical instructions for the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the dedication of the firstborn (12:40-13:16). The theme that dominates the text is how God “leads” (*nachab* 13:17, 21) his people through the sea to their final victory over Pharaoh. Now that Israel has at last been expelled from Egypt and is on the edge of the wilderness, she is more vulnerable than ever before and in dire need of God’s leadership. Pharaoh will make one last desperate attempt to take back his slaves by force. Brevard Childs shows how the text is a powerful interplay between God’s strategy and Pharaoh’s:

Literary Outline (Exod 13:17-14:31)

- a God Plans His Strategy (13:17-14:4)
 - b Pharaoh Plans His Strategy (14:5-9)
 - X Israel Strategically Placed between Pharaoh and God (14:10-14)
 - b’ God Will Use Pharaoh’s Strategy for His Glory (14:15-18)
- a’ God Executes His Strategy (14:19-31)

At the center is Israel, sandwiched precariously between the two.¹ “Israel can at first accept only Pharaoh’s perspective. Then God’s word through Moses and eventually the events themselves open Israel’s eyes to God’s perspective.”² Today, we will examine the first of these sections to discern four ways in which God leads his people as he plans his strategy.

I. God Leads With Pre-planning (13:17-18)

Now when Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, “The people might change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.” Hence God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea; and the sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt. (Exod 13:17-18 NASB)

Scholars have spent a great deal of effort trying to discern the exact route of the Exodus. But, as Sarna suggests, “It is easier to delineate the route that the fleeing Israelites avoided than to chart the course they actually took to their destination.”³ This is because the place names can no longer be identified, and there are several different possibilities for the meaning of the term “Red” or “Reed Sea” (*Yam Suf*, “Sea of Reeds”).⁴ What is clear is not so much *where* God led his people, but *how* he led them. In this chapter we will clearly

see that the Lord’s “leadership of his people is thoughtful, prudent, and utterly reliable.”⁵

The first thing we notice is that God’s leadership begins with pre-planning. He chooses not to lead his people on the shortest or most direct route from Egypt to Canaan. This would have taken them along the highway called “The Way of the Land of Philistines,” one of the most important arteries of international commerce and communication in ancient history. The reasons for not taking this route are quite evident. Sarna explains it was replete with Egyptian military outposts:

The country’s vulnerability on its northeastern borders led the pharaohs of all periods to secure this highway against hostile incursion. As early as the days of Amenemhet I (1991-1962 b.c.e.), a line of border fortifications was built along the isthmus of Suez. This defense line is known in several Egyptian texts as the “Wall of Horus,” that is, the “Wall of the Ruler,” for the reigning pharaoh was supposed to have been the incarnation of the god Horus... It is clear that several Egyptian forts, way stations, and watering places were located along this vital route from Egypt to Canaan. More than twenty such sites are named... recent excavations have unearthed six Egyptian fortresses along this coastal road.⁶

Mindful of the fragile faith of his people, God knows that these impressive fortifications might give Israel a change of mind, causing the people to lose their resolve for freedom and return to Egypt. This may also explain why the narrator uses the metaphor of a wall to describe the waters of the sea standing “like a *wall* to them on their right hand and on their left” (14:22). God will guard and guide the Israelites past the “Wall of the Ruler,” not through any human fortifications, but through a supernatural “wall” of protection.

God is keenly aware of the dangers that lurk in our departure from our “old world.” These temptations along the way pose a real threat to the road to freedom. Thus God pre-plans our route, taking measures that to us may at first appear circuitous, but in the end are for our welfare.

Today there is a modern highway, traveled by millions upon millions of people, linking every town and nation for commerce and information. Like the ancient Egyptian highway, it has countless Canaanite fortifications stationed at regular intervals for the sole purpose of destroying you. If you are naïve and travel on this highway unarmed, taking no precautions, you may come under severe attack. The highway is the Internet. You all know what the Canaanite fortresses are. Parents should not give their children open access to that highway. Though it may be cumbersome to add controls or filters by making the route to the Internet more circuitous, in the end you may preserve the fragile faith of your children.

Our protection is what lies behind God’s careful pre-planning. Because of this we should take great comfort that God has thought out everything in advance and can be thoroughly trusted when we are led down these circuitous and seemingly out of the way paths.

This is the reason our Lord instructs us to pray, “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Daily we are to invite the God of the Exodus to be as intimate a guide to us as he was to the Israelites.

The second quality of God’s leadership is given in verse 19, with the mention of the bones of Joseph.

II. God’s Leading Integrates Us With the Past (3:19)

Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones from here with you.” (13:19)

This mention of Moses carrying out the bones of Joseph seems to interrupt the flow of the journey. But the narrator attaches great significance to this verse, sandwiching it between the two accounts of Israel’s journey. The book of Genesis ends with Joseph’s passionate testimony of his faith in God’s promise to deliver Israel from the Egyptian tyranny, coupled with his request that his bones be taken to the land of promise. Joseph’s words are sealed in an oath (Gen 50:25), insisting that his brothers not leave him in Egypt. It is precisely at this moment in history that God’s faithful leadership is coming to pass. The bones of Joseph impress on this new generation that they are heirs of past generations who saw this day and believed in it from afar. There are two dangers to which the bones of Joseph speak. The first is isolation and individualism; the second is ancestor worship. Brueggemann makes a thoughtful point by applying “the bones of Joseph” to the modern church:

First, there is the danger the “now generation” in the church (particularly in a mobile, displacing society) may scuttle all the old ancestors (their names and their bones) and seek to live in a vacuum, excessively focused on the present. Second, there is the danger that a preoccupation with ancestors may treat the past like a relic—i.e., an act of nostalgia that resists present tense requirements.⁷

I find the first danger to be most prevalent in the United States, while the second is more common in Europe. Fierce independence and individualism are the hallmarks of many churches in America, especially California. There is very little sense of connectedness to the larger body of Christ or to history. Yet we are a product of our history: we are connected with those who went before us. We have countless blessings because of their labors and faith. Israel in essence owed its very survival to the sufferings, courage and faith of one of its ancestors, Joseph. Therefore they are not to leave Egypt without acknowledging the faith of their forefather and carrying his bones to their proper resting place. As the writer of Hebrews encourages us, “By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones” (Heb 11:22). Israel is acknowledging that they are not the first generation to believe, and that this new venture of the Exodus is tied to past promises.

In like manner, we ought to remember with appreciation those whose faith and courage have bestowed blessing on our lives. March of next year marks the twentieth anniversary of PBC Cupertino. It is very important that we never forget our forefathers who made this church possible. If you want to play a significant role in this body, you need to understand our history and all that has shaped the leadership of this church. It is unique in America in that most of our staff and elders have been together for over twenty years, some as many as thirty.

Many of us have had the privilege of being trained and influenced by our founder, Ray Stedman. Mark Mitchell’s biography of Ray, *Portrait of Integrity*, has just been published. I encourage everyone in this congregation to read it. There is no better testimony to our “bones of Joseph” than this book. It will help you understand the defining marks of this church. Its timeliness is important, since few of that first generation are still living and can give testimony to Ray’s life. Mark knew Ray well, but that does not blur his objectivity. He is as frank about Ray’s weaknesses as he is his genius. I commend this biography to you. As I read it I was filled with gratitude for God’s hand, which led me to PBC as a new Christian during my college years. At the time I had a full scholarship to USC, but I felt God leading me to Stanford, though I was given no financial support. Looking back, I think how ironic it was that my father paid a Stanford tuition for a PBC education! In my mind there was no comparison.

God leads with pre-planning. His leading us into new things does not cut us off from our past, but gives us a deeper appreciation for it. The present life that we are inheriting is the result of promises which God made in the past, believed upon by those who went before us. The third aspect of God’s leadership is seen in a mysterious cloud.

III. God Leads His People With Tangible Signs (13:20-22)

Then they set out from Succoth and camped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness. The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people. (13:20-22)

The third characteristic of God’s leadership during the Exodus is the personal care and protection he gives his people through tangible signs of his presence in creation. Israel will be led out of Egypt into a terrible wilderness, a dangerous place where they will be extremely vulnerable and unable to cope, lacking divine care and protection. Without a guide the journey will be impossible. Our text tells us that God himself became their guide and protector in a very tangible way through a permanent cloud column that “walked” before them. “Such phenomena impress the fact of God’s presence upon all the people’s senses, not just their minds or spirits. The whole person experiences the presence of God.”⁸ God was using the creation as a mirror of his redemptive activity.

The term “column” (*ammud* from the root “to stand” or “take one’s stand”) suggests that God is not distant from his people, but firmly plants his feet on the earth to guide them. The column took on the appearance of a cloud to shade them by day and a luminous column of fire to guide them by night. The narrator emphasizes the fact that this column was with them continuously. God never left his post. The cloud and fire provided powerful images of God’s presence to “express the splendor, glory, mystery, and awe surrounding God.”⁹ It was a reminder to Moses of his call at the burning bush, which would later envelop him upon Mount Sinai. Later, the cloud will fill the tabernacle with God’s glory (Exod 40:34).

This tangible sign became so significant to Israel that when the temple was built centuries later, two pillars were erected in its memory. They stood twenty-seven feet high and were named Boaz and Jakin (1 Kgs 7:21), meaning, “in him is strength,” and “he establishes.” Centuries later, this memory of God’s faithful leadership gave hope

to Nehemiah and encouraged him to pray to God to restore Israel from exile:

**You, in Your great compassion,
Did not forsake them in the wilderness;
The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day,
To guide them on their way,
Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which
they were to go. (Neh 9:19)**

Jesus promised his disciples that after his departure, God would again faithfully send a guide to lead them on their journey. It was the Spirit of Christ himself, a better guide than the pillar of cloud and fire:

“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.” (John 16:13)

When the Spirit was poured out on Pentecost, that too came with tangible signs:

And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. (Acts 2:2-4)

The gift of tongues was a clear sign that God’s presence was going before them to spread the gospel to all nations. I wonder if our modern technological culture insulates us so much from the creation that we sometimes miss the signs of God presence among us. On a missions trip several years ago, one of our team members shared her painful past. Before she spoke, she asked God if he would come and listen to her story. As she began to speak, a cloud of fog came and sat on the mountain right in front of where she was speaking. The cloud remained there the entire time, and disappeared just as she finished. Coincidence? Not for this young woman. To her, it was a vital demonstration of God’s silent, listening presence.

We should never take for granted God’s guiding presence. Perhaps, as the children of Israel did, we should set up tangible reminders, like the two pillars or Joshua’s memorial stones, after God has led us into new territory or done holy wonders on our behalf. I have strategically placed five select stones in the walkway to our home as a reminder of God’s miraculous leading in the birth of our five children.

The fourth characteristic of God’s leading of Israel is perhaps the one that is most fearful, yet in the end it does us the most good.

IV. God Leads Us Dangerously Close To Death (14:1-4)

Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Tell the sons of Israel to turn back and camp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea; you shall camp in front of Baal-zephon, opposite it, by the sea. For Pharaoh will say of the sons of Israel, ‘They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ Thus I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.” And they did so. (14:1-4)

Suddenly God tells Moses to instruct the sons of Israel to stop their forward progress, to “turn back” and make their camp “before

Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea.” These precise military commands place the Israelite army in a vice, sandwiched between the shadows of the Egyptian temples and the sea. At first glance this looks like strategic suicide, but later we learn that it will become the doorway to freedom. God will use the situation to make it appear that Israel is utterly disoriented and wandering aimlessly, to lure Pharaoh into the final conflict that will give Yahweh ultimate glory. Being set free from Egypt doesn’t imply that the battle is over, for as Brueggemann observes, “The departure of Pharaoh was only the beginning of battle, for the journey of freedom includes the struggle to stake out a zone of well-being in a busy, crowded world that is already organized without any reference to Israel’s existence or freedom.”¹⁰

This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of God’s leading, one that demands the most faith while we have to patiently wait for the outcome. Without the experience of this massive conflict, Israel will never understand the ultimate end of idolatry, something that is vital to faith. All idols will one day be buried at the bottom of the sea. In a moment of time, Israel will have her eyes opened to that fact as she views dead bodies and horses floating all over the sea. In that moment, just prior to death, all of Egypt will give glory to God, confessing that he alone is Lord. Before Israel makes her confession of faith and fully trusts in Yahweh, she hears the greatest nation on the face of the earth giving up its idols and giving glory to God.

As it was for the Israelites, so it was true of Jesus’ disciples. Before they grasped the full meaning of the cross of Christ and gave him their full trust, they heard the confession of a Roman soldier, “When the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’” (Mark 15:39).

This may explain why at times we may seem to be led down paths that are dangerously close to death. God is orchestrating history to bring down the glory of every idol. Idols always look glorious in the beginning, but as they take their grip upon the world, they consume their victims, until in the end those who worship them are remade in their image. They become blind to good and evil, deaf to reason, and numb to all emotion. Their sexuality becomes confused and they do things with their bodies which God never intended, things which rob them of every vestige of dignity. In the end, the only pleasures that remain are abusing the innocent or self-inflicted pain.

Now to our amazement, God may at times lead us to place our tent temporarily between the house of their gods and the sea. This is a scary moment in the life of faith. But God’s leading is not to destroy us but to wean us from the idols of the world by allowing us to see their end. The experience can be shocking, but it is vital to the soul. For though the Israelites had physically left Egypt, their hearts still carried the memory of her idols. In the wilderness, Israel would be purged of her idolatry and learn absolute dependence on the Lord. Oftentimes I hear stories from members of our congregation about how dealing with an abusive boss, a life-threatening illness, or responding to an accident leads them deeper into God’s love and removes the pull of idols in their hearts.

This truth may also suggest to us how we should evaluate the movies we allow our children to see. Many movies that appear harmless on the surface may in fact be fostering an unrealistic view of life. They never show the end of a matter, and the glory of an idol may be left standing at the movie’s end. On the other hand, movies that on the surface might be more disturbing may in fact be more

edifying, because they honestly portray the painful consequences of people's choices. In the end, an idol is skillfully unmasked for what it is. Many sports movies are unrealistic caricatures of life, designed to make us feel warm inside. We leave the theatre filled with adrenaline. Those of us who feel like underdogs hope that we too can have our day in the limelight, with a good dose of dedication, self-effort and sacrificial team spirit. The movie *Friday Night Lights* makes us feel none of that. In the film, which is based on a true story, we see the effects of an idol that consumes an entire town. A small Texas town lives in the memory of a football state championship won years ago. There is violence, abuse, racial prejudice and moral compromise. We see the legacy of young people who don't even know who they are, playing a game for a town that is as cruel as Pharaoh. If there is any affection to be awarded from family or friends, it comes at an awful price. But at last, after the idol has consumed every relationship in its wake, the director has accomplished his task. The idol has been unmasked for the dehumanizing demon that it is.

In summary, this is how God led his people during the Exodus. Never was Israel more vulnerable, and yet never was God more fully present. With pre-planning, he took note of their weaknesses. Through the bones of Joseph he integrated them with appreciation for their past. With tangible signs he used the creation to mirror redemption, so they would never forget how present he was. And finally, he led them right to edge of death, to purge them of idolatry. What a God we serve! He is our constant guide and personal protector. As pilgrims, the psalmist has these words for us on our way to the New Jerusalem:

**The LORD is your keeper;
The LORD is your shade on your right hand.
The sun will not smite you by day,
Nor the moon by night.
The LORD will protect you from all evil;
He will keep your soul.
The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in
This time forth and forever. (Ps 121:5-8)**

Have you given thanks for God's leading and protection in your life?

1. This outline is adapted from Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 224-229, and Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottdale, Penn.: Herald, 2000), 173-180.

2. Janzen, *Exodus*, 173.

3. Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 103.

4. See Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 106-108.

5. Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:789.

6. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 105.

7. Brueggemann, "Exodus," 790.

8. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 151.

9. Janzen, *Exodus*, 175.

10. Brueggemann, "Exodus," 789.

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