



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - February 26, 2017 Sermon

Wading into Troubled Water

John 5:2-9, Exodus 14:10-14, 21-22

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.—
Isaiah 43:1-2

The spiritual, *Wade in the Water*, suggests that in all the troubles of life, in all the experiences of life, there is an inner and binding logic that causes the particular experience in and of itself to be consistent; therefore rational. . . the "troubled waters" mean the ups and downs, the vicissitudes of life. Within the context of the "troubled" waters of life there are healing waters, because God is in the midst of the turmoil. . . .

There is at the heart of life a Heart. When such an insight is possessed by the human spirit and possesses the human spirit, a vast and awe-inspiring tranquility irradiates the life. This is the message of the spiritual. Do not shrink from moving confidently out into choppy seas. Wade in the water, because God is troubling the water.—Howard Thurman, *Deep River: The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*.

I always loved that spiritual *Wade in the Water*, but I never understood it. Whenever I heard it, I wondered, "Why would I—why would anyone—want to wade into troubled water?" And why would God trouble that water? I mean, if there's got to be troubled water, I would like God to provide me a bridge over that troubled water, thank you very much.

So a few acts of imagination to get us there:

Imagine, for a moment if we can, that we're ancient Israelites. We've been on the road out of Egypt for a couple days now, and we've made it to the edge of the wilderness. At first, when we looked over our shoulders, we didn't believe it, we didn't want to believe it—but now there's no denying it. Over our shoulders, in the distance, we can see the cloud—the cloud raised by the approaching Egyptian army. We've been running, running, running and they keep coming, coming, coming. How soon they're going to catch us—it's hard to say. But not long. It's only a matter of time now.

Because we're pinched into a valley now, and the Red Sea is in front of us. There's no place to go. It's only a matter of time, now. And you can feel the terror in your stomach spreading through your whole body, through everybody. Soon enough, we'll hear them coming: The pounding of hooves, the whirring of chariot wheels, the clatter and clang of shields and swords, the shouts of commanders, the cries of soldiers. They're coming. There's no place to go.

Who get us into this mess? Moses—that's who. Moses who said God spoke to him. Moses who got in Pharaoh's face with his "Let my people go." Moses whose words hardened Pharaoh's heart, who in turn made our work harder and harder: who ordered us not just to make bricks, but to gather the straw to make those bricks, while making the same number—no, an even greater number—of bricks. Our taskmasters driving, whipping, whipping and driving us. It broke our backs and our spirits.

Moses who brought down the plagues, all ten of those plagues—yes, on the Egyptians first but also on us too. And don't think our taskmasters didn't exact revenge on us for every one.

Moses who told us to mark our doors with blood and to pack our bags and keep them packed. We did what he said; we were ready to go for weeks, months. And then when he gave us the word, we took what valuables we had—and all the valuables of the Egyptians we could grab—threw them into our bags, and and threw the unleavened bread on top of them, just like he said, and we ran, and ran, and ran.

And now—we're stuck: Pharaoh's army coming fast behind us; twelve miles of Red Sea in front of us. So who's to blame? Moses—that's who.

"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you led us out here to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we tell you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die here in this wilderness."

Defeatism. Just leave me—leave us—alone. This is the way it's always been, and always going to be. The only alternative is death." For an oppressed people, the default drive is always defeatism. And truth be told, we're not even a people; we're a ragtag band of runaway slaves. And yet we are a people, we are God's people—because God said so. What was it that God said to Moses?:

"I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver my people from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . ."

. . . a land flowing with milk and honey. The promised land: home. That's the promise for us, God's people. And so now the question: Do we believe it? Because the wind has been blowing all night now, and Moses has had his arm raised all night now. God's been troubling the waters all night now. Look! Look! The waters are heaping up on one side—and on the other side. And look!—between them there's a corridor! Yes, but how long a corridor? And will it hold? Because once we start across, there's no going back . . . Do we have the faith to act, to wade into the water, trusting in the promise of God?

Imagine for a moment if we can, we're African-American slaves. Put yourselves in their shoes for a moment—shoes most of them didn't have. Like the ancient Israelites, we know, or at least we've heard about, what it's like to be chased and hunted; we've seen them bring back the runaway slaves tied and and bound, and we've heard—we've seen—what they've done to them.

And we've heard—we know—defeatism. "Just leave me—leave us—alone. This is the way it's always been, and always going to be. The only alternative is death." For an oppressed people, the default drive is always defeatism.

And yet we've also heard—and we've known in our heart—the promise of God. Because there have always been some among us who somehow learned to read, and read the Bible. And there have always been more among us who heard the promise of God and preached those promise to us: "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I am your God, too. I am the God who led Moses and the people out of slavery; and I am your God, too. I am the God who knows what it was like to be tied and bound, whipped and beaten, berated and spat upon, and hung up to die; and I am your God, too. We are God's people—because God said so: "I am your God, and you are my people. I have heard your cry on account of your taskmasters; I know your suffering, and I will deliver you. I will deliver you, my people, to the freedom and dignity I have always intended for you and for all human beings."

Wade in the Water: if you're gonna run away, wade in the water—walk up the streams, cross the creeks, ford the rivers—because if you do that, those bloodhounds and the men with the guns and the ropes—that gut wrenching terror of "they're coming, they're coming!"—they're much less likely to track you, if you wade in the water; God's gonna trouble the water—that's the promise.

Do we have the faith to act, to wade in the water, to run for freedom, to live for freedom, trusting in the promise of God? Thirty-eight years is a long time to be sick; a long time to lie on a mat. That long illness has oppressed him. You can hear it in how he answers Jesus. "Do you want to be made well?," Jesus asks him.

"I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." In other words, "Just leave me alone. This is the way it's always been, and always going to be. The only alternative is death."

For oppressed people, the default drive is always defeatism.

But Jesus pays no attention whatsoever to what the man says, or to his defeatism, or to his lack of faith; he pays no attention to the pool, or the water in the pool as to whether it is stirred up. Instead, he says only this: "Stand up, take your mat, and walk."

And yet even here, some act of faith, however minimal, is required of the man: he has to stand up. So let's put ourselves on his mat, if you will; do we have the faith to act now, not to wade into the water, but to stand up, forgetting about the water and its supposed curative power, to stand up and walk, trusting solely in the promise of God?

Now before you answer that question, consider this: 38 years is a long time. 246 years (the number of years African-Americans were enslaved) even longer; and 430 years (the number of years the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt) even longer still. And the thing is when you're living in those years, you don't know that it's going to be "only" 38 or 246 or 430 (and please hear the scare quotes around "only"). You can understand why the Psalmist cries "How long, O Lord, How long?" Because in the midst of the hardship—whatever the hardship is—we don't know how long it will go on—no one does. For all we know, it's going to be forever; it certainly feels like it—hence the temptation to defeatism.

The promise of course is that it will NOT last forever. The promise is that God is still at work, the promise is that one day we will find our true home, we will be free, we will have health and wholeness. The promise is one of full and complete life—that one day we will walk as we were meant to walk, as God's people, free and alive. That's the promise. . . Do we have the faith to act, to wade in the water (literally or figuratively), trusting in the promise of God?

And before you answer, consider this: God has a track record of troubling the water for creative, healing purposes. A track record that goes all the way back, to the very beginning of creation, Genesis Chapter 1 verse 1: In the beginning, the earth was without form, and it was void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. Until the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Until the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. God troubles the waters. God moves; God acts. This formless void, this life-deprived and life-depriving emptiness, this soul-sucking darkness is anathema to God, contrary to God, contrary to everything God is, contrary to everything that God does. God is being, the ground of all being. God is light, and life, and love that by God's very nature, simply flows from, overflows out of, God. The prophet Isaiah puts it this way:

For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!),
who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): I am the Lord, and there is no other.
I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness;
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, "Seek me in chaos."
I the Lord speak the truth, I declare what is right.

In the beginning, God troubled the water—for light and life and love.

God has a track record of troubling the water, and yet it must also be said that, at times, chaos has a way—any number of ways—of reasserting itself. In fact at many, many, many times, time and time and time again, and in innumerable ways, chaos reasserts itself. Starting with Adam and Eve eating from that tree, because they listened to that snake, who said they could be like God, to Cain who killed Abel because he believed God liked him better, to the corruption of Noah's day when no one cared what God liked, to the tower of Babel when everyone thought they could be like God, to Abraham's obliviousness, to Jacob's trickiness to Laban's selfishness, to the sibling rivalry between Joseph and his brothers. And that's only the Book of Genesis and only the highlights—or rather lowlights—of that book—chaos keeps reasserting itself.

And yet unless we lapse into utter defeatism, we never quite accept it. We have, in the words of the poet, a blessed rage for order—things have to make sense, there must be an order—and a moral order at that—to the universe. When we don't see that order—and for anyone with eyes to see, a brain to think, and a heart to feel there are many, many, many times when we don't see it—something inside us rages. It's this rage that Job exhibits when, even in the midst of all his suffering, he demands an audience with God: "Make sense of this, I want an answer!" And we all know what it feels like to be Job, to find ourselves in the midst of chaos, that doesn't make sense.

This chaos, this formless void, this life-deprived and life-depriving emptiness this soul-sucking darkness—this sin and this death that hold us and all creation captive—and all the manifold ways that sin and death hold us captive, and the number of those ways is legion—it is not acceptable to us because it is not acceptable to God, and we are made in the image of God. And God's gonna trouble the water.

The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me . . . I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

And then, when that one does come, and when John baptizes him in the Jordan river, when that one comes up out of the water, and when the Holy Spirit thereupon comes down to water, there's a voice from heaven: "This is my son, I love him, he pleases me to no end."

This is what Job knew somewhere deep inside when he said: "For I know that my redeemer liveth . . . yet in my flesh shall I see God."

God's a-gonna trouble the waters.

"Why should I, or we—or anyone—want to wade into troubled water?" And why would God trouble that water? Because within the context of the "troubled" waters of life there are healing waters, because God is in the midst of the turmoil. . . . Because those troubled waters are leading us, as God's people, home, home to freedom, to dignity, to health and wholeness, home to full and complete life as it was meant to be, home to God. Because we have the faith to act, to live as God's people, to wade in the water, trusting in the promise—the promised one—of God.

This is the message of the spiritual: Wade in the water, because God is troubling the water.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.