

“Who’s Your Leader?” Exodus 13:17-22

The Christian life can be summarized in two words: “Follow me.” These words invite us to a journey, a journey that is not safe but full of adventure, not easy but entirely transformation, a journey, not primarily to a path, but a PERSON. “Follow ME.” It doesn’t matter where the path goes, as long as we are with the PERSON leading us.

Jesus spoke these words again and again, to specific individuals (John 1:43) and crowds (John 8:12), in moments of decision (Mark 10:21), angst (Matthew 16:24), anticipation (Matthew 4:19), and in moments of restoration (John 21:19)

These words summarize God’s invitation to our church as well.

- What are we about? “Follow ME.”
- Where do we go from here? “Follow ME.”
- How do we get there? “Follow ME.”

Our mission, our vision, and our strategy is located in a person.

This is so important for us to hear, because we are standing on the edge of uncertainty. We’ve never lived in times like this. COVID, school, decisions about the future... it feels like LIFE IS FULL, not of periods or exclamation points, but question marks.

That’s why it is so incredibly important to turn our attention not to the uncertainties, but WHO IS LEADING US INTO THE UNKNOWN. Today, I want to call us to...

The Point: Trust the God who delivers to lead us into the future.

Exodus 13 tells us the story of a people standing on the edge of uncertainty, literally moving out on a new journey at the edge of an ominous wilderness in front of them. God had just delivered them out of slavery under the oppressive, cruel hand of Pharaoh, by raising up Moses and Aaron to lead his people and by performing ten miraculous signs and wonders in the form of plagues.

Their dawn of freedom finally arrived, and that is where we pick up in...

Read Exodus 13:17-22

I want to share three truths to help us navigate these uncertain days and move forward in unity as a church family.

1) When we feel lost, God is leading us (13:17-18).

Let me explain what is going on here.

- There were two routes to get to the Promised Land: the short way & the long way.
 - The Short way is described in verse 17 where it says, “God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near.”
 - The Long way is described in verse 18. “God led the people *around by the way of the wilderness* toward the Red Sea.”
 - I don’t know about you, but give me the short way!

- I'm a big fan of health and safety, so I applaud the efforts of groceries stores and their one-way traffic, but I'm not pumped up about taking 45 steps instead of 5 to grab that box of pasta!
- When I pull up my WAZE APP, I'm looking for the quickest route, and then I like to play the game of seeing if I get beat the ETA (without speeding!)
- "The way of the Philistines" would have put their ETA at about 5 days. BUT...
- That's like me telling you: I want you to march from Boston to NYC, but I want you to take a little detour through the Adirondack Mountains to Niagara Falls on your way.
- Now, these verses do not say the people felt lost. At the same time, our sanctified imagination would lead us to believe they were having conversations about why they headed in a wildly divergent direction. The next chapter reveals how quick they were to doubt and complain when things weren't going according to their plans! (Cf. Exodus 14:10-14)

Why would God take them on the long road home? The end of verse 17 gives us a clue...

- Part of God's loving leadership is how he protects us, FROM. US. God did not book them the non-stop flight, "For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt."
- God knew: #1) They weren't ready for war, and #2) that they would turn around in fear and intimidation, undoing the deliverance God had brought!

Here's what we need to know (as we navigate COVID and move into an uncertain future as a united church): God, as our Ultimate Leader, not only has VISION, he also possesses *infinite* WISDOM.

- God not only knows where he's taking us (and the destination is beyond our dreams!), he knows HOW to get us there.
- Vision requires wisdom, and God has both!

Let me ask you a couple of questions: What if God sees what you can't see? What if God has a better plan than what you've prayed for?

God puts it like this in Isaiah 55:8-9 (WRITE EM' DOWN, SCREENSAVE EM'!)

**"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."
(Isaiah 55:8-9)**

Can you believe God would have the audacity to say that? ;) God has more in mind than you have in mind. His purposes are higher (BETTER!).

Listen...

- If we saw what God sees, we wouldn't be complaining, we would be praising!
- If we are really convinced God's long road is the best road, we should fall to our knees and thank him for leading us, not according to our fragile plans, but his infinite wisdom.

T: God goes before us! It might not make sense now or for years to come, but we can trust: when we feel lost, we are being led. #2

2) When trust is hard, God is teaching us (13:18-19).

Can you imagine standing on the edge of wilderness? A place that was “wild, dry, desolate, nonarable (not suitable for growing crops), unfit for permanent settlement.”

This journey would have to be one of faith. I believe that’s why we have *verse 19*. “Moses took the bones of Joseph with him.”

Who was Joseph?

Joseph’s father was named Jacob, also known as Israel, the patriarch of the nation. Joseph’s great-grandfather was a man named Abraham, to whom God promised to give the land of Canaan to his offspring, make him a great nation, and most importantly, to bless all the families of the earth through him, which is another way of saying the Messiah that will save the world will be one of your descendants! (cf. Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-17, 17:1-8, & 22:15-18).

Joseph believed God would fulfill this promise with such deep, personal conviction that he “made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.”

“Why is this detail a part of the story?”

Those bones served as an object lesson of God’s faithfulness and Joseph’s faith.

- God had been orchestrating the exodus for hundreds of years! Joseph’s bones served as a visible reminder that God keeps his promises. “You will have the land!”
- God spoke through those bones: “I AM faithful. You can trust me.”

Hebrews 11:22 says: **“By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.” (Hebrews 11:22)**

Listen: when trust is hard (and trust IS HARD; we are professionals in trusting everything but God), God finds ways to teach us to trust him even more! His ways are HIGHER!

We see this in the larger exodus story.

- Fast forward 40 years, as Israel stood on the edge of the Promised Land, Moses said... **“And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)**
- They had to learn (“That he might MAKE YOU KNOW”) not to depend on their own resources.
- The long road taught them to depend on God every moment, to hang on his every word: “I will provide. I will strengthen. I will look out for you. I will fight your battles.”
- In this season: **What is God teaching you?**

Are you listening? Are you learning to depend on God like never before, learning to trust his plans, when it feels like ours have crumbled to the ground, learning to believe he still leads and guides and provides?

Journeying with Jesus is not only about where we are going, but who we are becoming. God often modifies our timetable because he wants to produce something beautiful in us!

Don’t waste 2020. Yes, I know 2020 STINKS. I almost bought the t-shirt in Rockport a couple weeks ago, but let’s not miss this opportunity to learn and grow, and to do it TOGETHER! This is so subtle you might miss it!

- When the end of verse 18 says: “the people of Israel went up ... equipped for battle.” That’s actually a bad translation.
- The Hebrew reads: “they went up out of the land of Egypt organized by fifties,” which resembled military units marching forward, marching together, the only way you’d survive the wilderness.
- God wants to teach US to trust, TOGETHER, COLLECTIVELY.

T: He is teaching us, and He is WITH US. That’s what we find in vv. 20-22

3) When the way is difficult, God is with us (13:20-22).

Read 20-22.

Here they were, on the edge of the wilderness, and God says: I’ll lead the way. I will be with you. Look at verse 21, “And the Lord went before them...”

God was present in the pillar of cloud and fire. Scholars call this a “theophany, a manifestation of God’s presence with his people.” There were not two pillars, as it might seem, but one pillar (cloud by day, fire by night). [Exodus 14:24 makes this explicit.]

- One scholar writes: “By reason of being guided by the pillar, the Israelites knew all day every day that God was present with them. Here was a supernatural, huge, and visible reminder that Yahweh was at the head of his people as they marched or encamped, whether by day or by night. . . . Yahweh chose the odd route—not they. [T]he pillar was not merely a sign from Yahweh—it was Yahweh.” (Stuart)
- When you don’t know where to go... follow God’s light.
- When you are afraid, rest in God’s protective covering (Psalm 105:39).
- When you’re in a wilderness season, you are not alone.

God, not Moses, was Israel’s Ultimate Leader! God, not our Pastors, not our Staff, is the Ultimate Leader of our church and every church!

You say, “Pastor Tanner, I wish God would put a huge cloud in front of me with this decision or this difficult assignment.”

He’s done something better. He’s given us Jesus!! Jesus is our Ultimate Leader... In John 10, he said: “I am the Good Shepherd...”

“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” (John 10:3-4)

And Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit, who is not simply God among us, or God in front of us - as amazing as the pillar of cloud and fire may be, the Holy Spirit IS GOD IN US!

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” - Jesus, in John 14:16-17

APP:

Day by day... God is leading us. He doesn’t start and stop! Verse 22.

- Where do you need God's direction?
- Where do we need God's direction?

There's no doubt this is an uncertain season. We don't know what life or our church is going to look like 2 months from now, 10 months from now, or 2 years from now.

But we know this: The same God is with us. He goes before us in the mission he has given us! He has called us to follow him together! He may lead us the long way. He may use a pandemic to teach us to trust him, but when we feel lost, we are being led!

Conclusion:

Jesus is saying once again: "Follow me." Will you follow him? Redemption Hill: Will we follow him together?

As we conclude our time, please take a moment of reflection and consider: what's your next step as you follow God's leadership in the life of our church.

RHC Challenge: Take your next step with Redemption Hill as we follow God's leadership together.

Whatever that is!

Discipleship Strategy MAP (That we use in NEXT).

You pick! Come Back... [Next...] Group... Team... Follow Jesus (Make him your Leader)!, Covenant Class... Multiply... Leadership... Mission... (inviting you into ministry)

In Exodus 13, Israel's journey had just begun. The same is true for us. Great days mark tomorrow, because the God who delivers is the God we trust to lead us into the future.

Pray: "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness..." (Psalm 25:10)