***DEFINING MOMENTS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

September 13, 2020

Texts: Exodus 14:5-14, 19-31 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

 Nineteen years ago this weekend Americans were struggling to come to terms with the reality of 9/11. When those jets crashed into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and that Pennsylvania corn field, the world suddenly changed for us – or perhaps more accurately, our perception of the world changed. Many of you remember exactly where you were when word of those attacks was first reported. A handful of us were gathered for a Bible Study in the Fellowship Hall when we heard about a jet striking one of the Twin Towers in New York. We didn’t know if it was an act of terror or mechanical failure or a terrible pilot error, but in the space of the next few hours as we learned of the other attacks, the world became a much more dangerous place for us, this nation suddenly more vulnerable, our lives more fragile than we had previously known or willingly acknowledged. In a short space of time we learned what folks in Northern Ireland, Israel, Syria, Pakistan, and a host of other violent corners of the earth have long known – that all human life is fragile, no nation is completely secure, and evil is real in our midst. It was a wakeup call and a defining moment for a generation of Americans!

 There have been a host of such defining moments across our nation’s history, some positive and some negative – the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Neil Armstrong’s first step on the moon – events that changed our lives and our perception not only of our nation but of our place in the world or even the cosmos. Stories are told of those events so that future generations can understand the significance they played in shaping who we are as a people today. As individuals too we have such defining moments in our lives, something out of the ordinary that changes the course of life. One of those moments for me came at a traffic light in Carlisle, PA when I resolved to leave my law practice and go to seminary, a decision cemented by Karen just hours later, a defining moment that changed the path of these past thirty years for our whole family. Maybe you have had such a defining moment in your life, some event that made you see yourself and your future in a whole new way.

 For the people of Israel, the Exodus was such a defining moment. It is the event that our ancestors in faith hearken back to again and again in story and in song, reminding them of God’s faithfulness and God’s saving presence in the midst of dire times. It is a story that begins in bondage in slavery and ends on dry land as the Israelites cross the Sea of Reeds and take their first steps on a forty-year trek through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. As Sarah noted in her sermon last Sunday, in the Passover meal the people recall God’s saving act in Egypt, God’s deliverance of the people. But in that exodus story, one event stands out, an event that is retold again and again, a defining moment for the people of Israel; it is the story you heard this morning: the deliverance of the people from the Egyptians on the shores of the Red Sea, which is more accurately called the Sea of Reeds.

 After fleeing Egypt in the dark of night with Pharaoh’s coerced blessing, the Hebrew slaves found themselves perched on the shores of the sea with the Egyptian army closing in quickly upon them. Pharaoh had changed his mind and sent his army to bring the people back. The Israelites were in a panic and began to wonder if their freedom or very lives were about to be lost. God had seemed very present in the midst of the plagues that resulted in their exodus from Egypt, but in the desert with the sea ahead of them and Pharaoh’s army closing in behind them, God seemed strangely absent. Fear took hold. The life they had left behind no longer seemed so unbearable; forgotten were their cries to God to deliver them from the hands of the Egyptians. Forgotten was their suffering and despair on the banks of the Nile. Forgotten was the hard labor and brutal taskmasters. God had been present with them in Egypt, but in the desert God seemed to be nowhere in sight. Their what-have-you-done-for-me-lately perspective was that God had led them out and then abandoned them to die in the wilderness at the hands of the very people from whom they had been delivered. So, they railed against Moses and rued the day that they had left the bondage of Pharaoh.

 The rest of their story there at the Sea of Reeds is the answer that we all would like to have in times of inordinate peril and runaway fear: God delivered them. The pillar of cloud safeguarded the people from the Egyptian army through the night, and then as Moses stretched out his hand, the Lord parted the waters with a strong wind and the people walked to freedom across dry land. When the Egyptians tried to cross, their chariots stuck in the mud and the waters came tumbling down on them, and so the Lord saved Israel. Seeing their salvation made tangible in the bodies of Egyptian soldiers washing up on the seashore led the people to fear the Lord, to believe in the Lord, and to know with confidence that the Lord was with them. It is an old, old story that Israel loves to tell for it defined not only their new life, but also their relationship with the God who saved them.

 It was not the last defining moment for them. Another came at the foot of Mt. Sinai when Moses came down with two tablets of stone and ten commandments that defined the boundaries of the people’s life together as God’s people. Another came when they were carried off into exile away from the tangible reminders of God’s presence with them. To be a follower of the Lord is to know the significance of those stories in the life of God’s people – the ways in which those experiences shaped them and defined their relationship with God. They are moments recalled when times are tough or faith is faint, for at the heart of those stories is the strong affirmation of the enduring love and presence of God who does not forget God’s chosen people, even when we forget God.

These are defining moments for our ancestors in faith, but perhaps they are also defining moments for God. For, it is in these moments that God is revealed for who God really is, in these moments that the relationship is defined between God and the people God claimed as God’s own. God chooses to act in those moments, and it is the people of God who are the beneficiaries of God’s gracious choices. God floods the earth, but spares a remnant – Noah, his family, and the animals – rather than scrap the whole project and start over. God approaches Abraham and barren Sarah with a covenant to be their God and the absurd promise that their descendants will be as numerous as the sands of the seashore. God reveals the divine name – YHWH – to Moses at the Burning Bush. God delivers the Israelites from bondage and saves them at the Sea of Reeds. God forms the Israelites into a community with those Ten Commandments delivered at the foot of Mt. Sinai. And when the people are carried off into exile, the Lord does not forget them there, but brings them home. Those moments reveal the Lord to be a God who chooses to be in relationship with humanity, a God who loves God’s people like a parent, a God who remembers and saves God’s people, a God who never gives up on them – for in the repeated refrain of the psalmist:

*The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever*

*and God’s faithfulness is to all generations!*

That is who God is!

 As Christians we know that God had yet another defining moment that has shaped our lives and relationship with God beyond any other – the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. His death and resurrection have changed the world, revealing God to be not only a loving God, not only a Savior, but also a forgiving God, a God of hope. In the words of Diane Moffett, president of the Presbyterian Mission Agency:

*It is the person of Jesus, unjustly tried and murdered by the state, that makes me understand we are not alone. It is the knowledge of the cross and the glory of the resurrection, it is the power of the spirit, the presence of God, the hope of the church – not just in the sweet by and by. It is the hope of the church in the nasty here and now that causes us, you and I, to keep working.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The same God who saved the Israelites at the Sea of Reeds, saves us from sin and death, offering us life, hope, peace, and courage with which to face whatever challenges may come – and urging us, always urging us, to work for a more just, peaceful, and loving world, as Jesus showed us.

 The death toll from Covid-19 is now sixty times that of 9/11! Whether this pandemic proves to be another defining moment for us and our nation remains to be seen. It has certainly upended our lives over these last months and into the near future, but whether it changes our view of the world and the way we live in the long haul or becomes just another medical malady we survive and forget about – like the Spanish flu of 1918 or polio or the swine flu – is not yet certain. Whether the death of George Floyd and the resulting protests that have forced us to wrestle with the long specter of racism that continues to haunt our nation is such a defining moment is not yet clear. We hope that it will lead to change in hearts and minds and policies that will bring justice and equity for our brothers and sisters of color, so that we might live together in peace in a beloved community that is more the way God intends it to be. But such change does not come easily; to be a defining moment does not allow a return to the past way of doing things or being. It demands real change!

So much does seem to be changing and yet is unknown these days; perhaps these times will result in changes for us and our children and our children’s children. Or perhaps they will pass and we will return to doing what we did before the pandemic and the wrestling with racism. We don’t yet know. But one thing we do know from the defining moments of the past is that God is with us – to strengthen us, to save us, to forgive us, to love us through it all – but also to call us to work for a better, more faithful way of life as children of God and disciples of the risen Christ. For, that is who we are and that is who we are called to be: those who dare to hope, dare to love, dare to forgive, dare to trust, dare to act – not ***despite*** these turbulent times, but ***because*** these are turbulent times! And whether we do act – or don’t – may itself be a defining moment for us, for our ancestors, and for our relationship with the God who acts to save us. Amen

1. Diane Moffett quoted in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, July 13, 2020, p.9 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)