

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

Who You Gonna Believe?

A sermon preached September 28, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Exodus 17:1-7 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah¹ and Meribah,² because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Matthew 21:23-32 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁸ "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father¹ went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

The rebellious grumbling of the angry, thirsty crowd Moses had dragged out of Egypt was really getting on his nerves, not to mention God's. The Israelites were not happy campers. They were brick-makers and laborers, not survivalists. There was freedom in the desert, but freedom doesn't fill the belly or slake a parched throat. When you're tired and thirsty and baking in the desert sun, that old slavery in Egypt beckons like an all expenses-paid vacation in Cancun.

Life is change, and we are generally able to accommodate quite well to changes that are gradual. Sudden, radical disruptions dishevel us. So, consider the Hebrews whose whole mentality was centered on being slaves suddenly finding themselves cast in the role of actors in an experimental theatre, thrust onto a barren stage and told to improvise their lines. They panic when they realize it is not a romantic comedy they are playing, but serious melodrama, and no one seems to know how it's supposed to end. They wouldn't be the first company of players that wanted to kill the director.

The point of the story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of slavery isn't historical, it's theological. It is told to proclaim truths and insights about humanity's relationship to God. It's about covenant and promise, purpose and destiny and about our plight as persons who don't know our way.

Perhaps most importantly, it is a story about authority and how we deal with it. Now, authority is a kind of tricky issue because there are so many different ways of thinking about it. "If you don't stop your dog from barking at three AM every night, I'm going to call the authorities!" is one way we think of the term. Or, we refer to experts in a field of discipline as authorities. Religious folk think of their sacred texts as their authoritative in matters of faith and practice. Company employees recognize the authority of their bosses and managers. Moses represented authority amidst the Hebrews, though at this point in the story that was his main problem.

The issue of authority, however, is even more complex if we think of it as all those things that hold sway over us. To be human means to be particularly susceptible to external influences. For instance, take habit. The Hebrews may well have been groaning under the yoke of slavery in Egypt, but nobody was going to do anything about it – not even Moses – until God forced the issue. Habit is one of the prime authorities in our lives – habits of action, habits of thought, and habits of acceptance of even that which is uncomfortable, stifling, or evil. As a friend of mine is in the habit of saying, "Nothing predicts behavior like behavior." *Habit* is from the Latin for *a place to dwell*, and *to dwell* may be both a place to live and a description of inertia.

So, what has influence over us? It's an important question to consider in this election season. We like to think that we are being thoughtful and rational in considering for whom to cast our votes, and to some extent we are, but there are always other forces complicating the matter. Take tradition, for instance. Sam likes to tell about her mother who described herself as a

“yellow dog Democrat.” She’d vote for a yellow dog before she’d ever vote for a Republican. There are strong but invisible social, cultural, and economic influences that have authority over us and they are distributed nicely across all party lines.

There are other forces at work. A couple of research projects reported on in recent weeks are telling. One study asked the question, “Could political views be driven by biology?” Researchers at the University of Nebraska placed sensors on test subjects’ finger to measure skin moisture. They also placed sensors under the subjects’ eyes to measure how hard they blinked. Then they flashed various images on a screen. Some images were very soothing and non-threatening; others were startling and disturbing. Also, occasional bursts of static were fed to the subjects’ ears through headphones.

The researchers found that they could predict what a person’s political beliefs were based on how strongly the person’s body responded to the alarming images and sounds. In the report published in the journal *Science*, the leader of the study said that he hoped his research would build tolerance in persons toward those on the other side since we could understand that each person can have a very different experience of the same world sometimes.

Well, one can hope, but the evidence is not encouraging. Another research project studied the effects of negative political advertising. Test subjects who had been screened and determined to be – shall we say – unusually staunch in their political views were shown an attack ad directed at the candidate from the other side. Then the subjects were interviewed and scored as to how certain they were of the facts as presented in the ad. Next, the interviewers produced factual proof that contradicted point by point the attack ad they had seen, proving that the ad was a pack of lies. Then they interviewed the control group again. The rate of certainty that the negative ad’s allegations were true rose significantly. Think about that: providing facts in direct refutation to lies actually intensified the belief that the lies were true.

In the classic Marx brothers film *Duck Soup*, Chico Marx is disguised as Groucho. The real Groucho has left the room, and Margaret Dumont turns and spies Chico. “I thought you left,” she says. “Oh no, I don’t leave,” Chico replies. “But I saw you with my own eyes,” Dumont says. “Well, who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?” Chico snaps back.

It’s a wonderfully silly film, and a really good question. What are we to believe? The hand is quicker than the eye magicians tell us, and the mind reassembles what we see with a logic all its own regarding people, politics, self, God, and destiny. We swim in a soup of claims on our allegiance; we are whiplashed in our response to authority. With so many claims to truth, with so many lookalike principles producing drastically different outcomes, with lies posing as fact, with political spin shape-shifting the landscape before our very eyes, who and what can we trust? Does the fact that our interests will best be served by one party’s agenda make it true if it fails to serve others? Shall we

choose based on color or gender or region – do such elements make our choices better, or worse, or neutral?

We can trust these research projects or not, polls or not, sound bites or not. What each of us must confess is that what has authority over us is multiplex, we are influenced by forces to which we are unaware, and it should be an act of faith and humility to regularly question as to whether in Christ we have truly seized our freedom to be God's people and not a people of rebellious confusion wandering in a desert of wants.

Why else is it meaningful to talk about a white vote or a black vote or a Latino vote? Why else is it meaningful to admit that the region of the country you live in makes you a voter in a red state or a blue state? Why else is it possible to talk about the male vote and the female vote? And what kind of integrated, coherent life does it suggest we should be seeking if we are to hold integrity with one ultimate loyalty instead of being pieced out to the highest nagging bidder for our affections?

Jesus boldly strides into the Temple and begins teaching. It's an audacious move and one not taken kindly to by the officials. "By what authority do you do these things?" the temple officials ask Jesus. The question is a officious form of the more huffy, "How dare you!" "Who gave you this authority?" they ask, which is just a kinder, gentler way of saying, "Who do you think you are!" The little debate that ensues about John the Baptist leads to Jesus' refusal to play their game about rights and privileges and authority.

The temple officials have asked a reasonable question, however. I'd expect to get something of the same reaction if I strode into St. Mary's cathedral and started preaching. And, it's a question each of us needs to answer for ourselves. What gives Jesus a place of authority over our minds and hearts? How is that authority exercised? Where does he stand in relation to all the other loyalties we have? What does it mean to say Christ is Lord?

It won't do to simply pull out our Cliffs notes on church doctrine and recite a creed. The question is whether or not we have submitted ourselves to his will, have we entrusted our faith to him, and have we conformed our lives to his service? The ultimately irony is that we are only truly free after we have completely given ourselves over to be slaves of the one thing most worthy of our precious lives' energies, God in Christ the servant of all.

Our faces are lined with stories – some public, some terrifyingly private – about our slaveries and satisfactions, our freedoms and deprivations, and the rough lessons and blessings of life. And within those stories lies the desert where we have wandered wondering what it all means, seeking answers to our perplexities, and longing to find one thing to live by that integrates our divided and dispersed loyalties into one, bringing coherence to our fractured souls.

Many of us on this journey of soul quickly weary of the trek and we begin longing for the same old slaveries. They are so much easier. Like the Hebrews, so devoted to keeping life comfortable and easy, the blessing God

would give us in the journey remains out of reach because we are so attached to the numerous lesser loyalties which give us comfort but leave us dry and hungry. The point is that if we don't follow Christ, we will follow something else, and you won't be in good hands.

Everything has a price; every comfort costs; every choosing of something is a rejecting of something else. Every satisfaction depends on our making some sort of commitment, which though we may not think of it as slavery, is nevertheless something that claims on us and begins to rule over us: for a big salary, a demanding job; for good grades, disciplined study; for health and fitness, restrained appetites and regular exercise. The choices we make as a nation run this way, too. For cheap oil, strange alliances with regimes whose principles refute our own; for Superpower status in the eyes of the world, billions poured into armament instead of investing in the needs of persons. Everything has a price, everything a cost...and each and every choice will turn around and enslave us. The Bible speaks to two types of slaveries: the kind the Hebrews knew in Egypt, and the kind the disciples knew in Christ. Where do you choose?

It's hard to make that choice. It would be easier – although meaningless – if God simply took control and forced the matter, but that's not the God the Bible describes. As Tony Compolo puts it, "Without freedom, none of us would be able to choose to love God – and loving him is what God wants from us more than anything else. Love is, by its very nature, voluntaristic. It is never constrained. What I am saying is that God deliberately gives up power in order to express his love for us and to give us the freedom to choose to love him in return."

Omnipotence is an idea that came from the Greek philosophers, not the Bible. The prophets declared God more powerful than all other gods, but they didn't say God was in control of everything. "The God we find in both the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament is a God who pleads with his people to do justice and live out love. This is a God whom Christians call the Servant King and that Jews acknowledge as a God who limits his power so that we might have the dignity that goes with willingly choosing to do what is right and good." [Compolo, *Tikkun*, May/June 2007]

In this life where our affections and loyalties are claimed by complex influences, where to sort through these claims and pressures require superhuman abilities we don't possess, our best use of our limited freedom is to choose that which is ultimate, not temporary, and durable, not passing. Our best use of our freedom is to vest our faith in that which transcends the limitations of biology and race and clan and class and color and economy and gender and religious practice and accept the cross of Christ as ours, too, to bear.

For he was the one who shared this life, who knew the complexities of human existence, knew the temptations to self-service, to thoughtless choice, to casual commitment, but of whom it is written, "...emptied himself, taking

the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”
[Philippians 2:6-13]