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Riverdale Presbyterian Church
Exodus 17:1-7
Ordination and Installation Sunday
February 24, 2008

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. 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?" 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?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 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. 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. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

I remember standing on the shores of Samaná, Dominican Republic, looking at the beauty of the vast sea ahead of me. Waves can be so beautiful, their power, their sound, their forcefulness, their messiness, their carriage of sand and grit and salt and memories and decomposition. Samaná is on the eastern tip of this small country packed with poverty, hopes for an economic way out of a homeland that is ferociously loved. As I stood with the sea ahead of me, I wondered if I looked hard enough if I could see the shores of Puerto Rico just a stone's throw away.

My mind wandered to thinking of those thousand refugees who climbed little boats, or yolas, every year finding their way to Puerto Rico with hopes of a better life, more opportunities, promises of entering the United States, too often thought of as a Promised Land. They journey by stages, coming from their home towns or plots of country land to the Samaná peninsula. They save money to pay someone to help them get over. They climb boats, sometimes inflatable rafts mounted in tucked away corners of the world with just a little water and food for the journey. A great many of these people are caught approaching the shores of Puerto Rico, to be charged and sent home.

In my time living in the Dominican Republic, I have never met anyone personally who has tried to make the passage from shore to shore and so I hesitate to speak about their experiences. All I have is what I have read and the stories I have been told and what I can imagine. This week I kept thinking of all the people who journey in stages crossing boundaries on their way to something different, hopefully something better, people risking their lives over borders between Mexico and Texas, the Dominican Republic and

Puerto Rico, Cuba and Miami, Israel and Palestine, North and South Korea, and many other places whose names I and you do not know. I think also of slaves who traveled from north to south in the United States, of Harriet Tubman who helped hundreds enter relative freedom, trip by trip, stage by stage.

As I think of all kinds of refugees I wonder how often there was no water to drink on the journeys to a new place. How often on an inflatable boat in the middle of the sea, in the middle of waves that aren't so beautiful when they are crashing in on you, in the middle of water that is undrinkable, people have cried out with fists in air: "Give us water to drink!"

The journey north with Harriet Tubman was not an easy one, physically, emotionally, spiritually. It was known that she carried a revolver and was not afraid to use it, often as protection from slave catchers and their dogs. She also used it for those times when morale would become low and bodies would fatigue. Once a slave agreed to join her expedition, there was no turning back – and she threatened to shoot anyone who tried to return. Tubman told the tale of one voyage with a group of fugitive slaves, when morale sank and one man insisted he was going to go back to the plantation. She pointed the gun at his head and said: "You go on or die." Several days later, he was with the group as they entered Canada.[1]

Cannot we hear the conversation from the text this morning again: "Moses said to the slaves he was freeing, "Why do you quarrel with me? Do you not trust? The people complained and complained and said, "Why was it your idea to bring us out of slavery in Egypt, to kill us and our children and animals with thirst?"

This is about those times, you know when they are, those times when we are half way through and fear takes over. Those times when we are in the middle somewhere, implementing decisions we made, callings we have received and we have to just throw up our arms in the air and say that life is too hard, that God expects too much, that we don't have what it takes.

Our career hasn't been going so well lately and we know it is time for a change. We know it and we are waiting to see what happens, and money is a little bit tight, and we don't really see what the next step is going to be. And how easy it would be to go back to what we know, even though that old way of putting food on the table is killing our soul. And the temptation is there...

We left a relationship that was killing us. We knew it wasn't right, it may be have been at one point, there were moments of magic. But now we are living in separate places and we just want to be held, we just want dinner left on the table when we get home late at night, we just want a good fight so it can feel like old times, we are having a hard time paying the bills and juggling child care and it would be so much easier if we could get back together; even though it is not right, the temptation is there...

There was the day the diagnosis came. And then there were the appointments, the treatments, the times when we realized who our friends really were. We were ready to beat this, we were ready to fight it all the way, we weren't going to let go. And then there

are the in between times when our body aches all over, our spirit is just tired, no matter how many baths we take and treats we receive the desire to fight this through just isn't there anymore. The temptation is there...

We knew it was time to tell the parents that the roommate for the past many years isn't just a roommate, but their son-in-law. It had been made clear before, the worst thing in the world was for the parents to have a gay son, but the hiding couldn't continue. The hiding, the potential missteps, the fear of them finding out the wrong way just has to stop. To be faithful we must tell. We have made the plans, we have scheduled the trip, we have made up our mind. But then there are the doubts, how will mom and dad respond, how long will it be before we feel their love again, will we regret this move, we are more comfortable with our relationship how it has always been all these years, the temptation is there...

The people, they journeyed by stages and they were thirsty. The thirst for newness, the thirst for difference and change overpowered them and so they began to thirst for what had always been. But there was no going back. As Harriet Tubman said, "you go on, or die."

To go on they had to cry out, they thought they were being killed, that their thirst, their destructive desires were signs of God leaving them. To be so thirsty certainly meant that God had taken a break, wasn't really as concerned as they may have thought at one time when enough had been enough and they made the decision, or the decision was put on them to go out on the sea and trudge through the desert.

And so we turn to our leader and accuse him of having the bad idea in the first place. We turn to Moses and we complain and complain, we quarrel and we fight, and we blame him for killing us, for giving us nothing at all to drink, for bringing us this far and yet we are abandoned and alone, we are convinced. At least when we were in slavery life was predictable. And so we know, we just know that we certainly won't make it to the other side of this, growth has never felt so hard before, this isn't working, and so all of our destructive desires come together and we plan on stoning our leader, for sure this would help us feel better.

This is a tricky road to follow on the day that we acknowledge our leaders, our elders and deacons, those in whom we put our trust to make decisions on our behalf, to care for us. This is a challenging road to follow at this very particular moment when we know your Pastor will be moving on in a few months to pursue other things and your leadership will be more important than ever. This is a road you may want to turn back from in this great time of transition as a congregation when some of our people here in the pews this morning will be especially anxious and want to throw stones. For sure most of you, if not all of you who will be ordained and installed today, those of you who will experience the warmth of the hands of those who have gone before you upon your back and your head and your arms, you don't feel as patient or prophetic or as called as you can imagine Moses to be. There may be some of you who come to this place of humbly kneeling before God and those who have gone before you stunned that

you have been asked. There may be some of you who have accepted the nomination by your people and yet aren't so sure that you are good enough, holy enough, ready enough to serve. There may be some of you holding deep secrets, some of you who think, "if they really knew who I was I wouldn't be here." There may be some of you who know how very contentious and painful the issue of ordination is for those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and therefore come to this place with ambiguity.

The thing about ordination is that when the hands are laid, when the questions are asked, this is not the end. The questions that will be asked of you are not in relationship to your perfection or your readiness. They are not questions that will ask how many hours you will spend devoted to the task or how much money you give to the church. They are not questions regarding your past or your plans for the future. They are questions that acknowledge an intention, a commitment, a devotion to the ways in which Jesus our Christ lived and died. They are questions that ask you to take seriously the tradition from which we come and to challenge that tradition to keep it alive and fresh and relevant for the people today. They are questions that ask if you are willing to stick in it for the long haul and guide your people through 40 years in the wilderness when you don't even know if you will be able to make it to the other end.

This is a time when a new stage begins. We ordain for life, not a 3-year term. This is a life-long stage of acknowledgement of your leadership skills, of your skills for compassion and reflection of the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

When Moses knew the people wanted to stone him he asked God what in the world to do. How was he to lead when they were so thirsty, so fed up, so very much in the middle of the crises that the other end could not even be dreamed of?

God told him to take some of the elders. Go ahead of the others and take the staff that pulled off miracles at the Nile. Stand in front of a rock, which appears to have no water whatsoever, and strike it, and the water will flow forward. Not salt water from the ocean that would do damage, not water from fire hoses that would burn, but good and pure and healthy water that will quench all thirst and crankiness and disbelief that God isn't anywhere to be found.

Elders, Deacons, all Members of this Congregation. When we are so thirsty we think we may die we are called to turn to each other's leadership and seek the Water that quenches all thirst. We are called to look in the very places that may cause us the most pain for a rock that has inside of it the gift of water. It is through the leadership and trust of Moses, as imperfect as he was, that we believe God provides the necessary resources for life outside of bondage. It is through this leadership that we bathe in the waters of liberation. So drink abundantly, beloved, drink in your imperfection and your fear and your doubt. Drink and go on, choose life.

[1] This paragraph is taken primarily from Wikipedia entry on Harriet Tubman.