

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Fourth Sunday after Christmas

January 18, 2009

Crooked Sticks and Broken Things

Exodus 17:1-7 and Luke 4:16-24

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The Old and New Testaments show the love and power of an eternal Heavenly Father who made a covenant with imperfect people to be their God. Frequently, people underestimated God's willingness and ability to use common things to achieve uncommon results so they would worship Him and have abundant life.

In today's Old Testament scripture, God is releasing His people from slavery under the rulers of Egypt and the influence of their many gods and goddesses. He did this by calling Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt into the wilderness of Sinai.

There they wandered in the desert and complained to Moses about the lack of water. Moses went to God who gave Moses instructions: "Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did as he was told, and he called the place Massah and Meribah because that was where the Israelites quarreled and they tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:5-7)

Then the people grumbled about lack of food. Again, Moses went to God, and God gave Moses specific instructions: The people would receive quail as meat for the evening and each morning, manna from heaven, except on the Sabbath.

However, when Moses went up into the mountain to be with God and stayed several days, the people became restless. They thought God was no longer with them, and they turned to Moses' brother, Aaron. Aaron had the people melt down their gold rings and bracelets and shaped them into a golden calf.

When Moses came down from being with God and getting the first Ten Commandments, he discovered the people worshipping that golden calf instead of God. In anger, he threw down the stone tablets breaking them beyond recognition while raging at the people for turning away from God and worshipping an idol. God had not deserted them. They had given up on God and thought God was no longer with them.

Knowing that God is with us can bring a peaceful, abundant life. When we are aware of God, we have hope and guidance, strength for the day and light to overcome dark times. God acted in history to save, guide, feed, and provide for His people both in the wilderness and later in the Promised Land.

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In New Testament days, when the people felt God's presence in Jesus Christ, there was healing, understanding, and joy in His Presence. When they did not feel God's Presence, they liked to hear Jesus read to them and hear what He had to say that supported what they believed.

However, when he started talking about how they did not recognize God acting in their midst, their attitude turned to anger, and they tried to get rid of Jesus. Apparently, they only felt God among them when things were going well, when they were being complimented, but not when they were being criticized.

God is with us—perhaps especially when we need Him the most—as in when we try to decide and accomplish things on our own or when we try and limit God to only working with us when everything is going well.

Today, as in olden days, without relying on God's presence, we are on our own. When we think God is no longer with us and we have to face life on our own, we may learn that the advice we give ourselves is not always the best. In fact, our decisions can continue to take us in a direction away from God.

Much of the world operates on the basis that everything depends on human choices without the Lord being in the picture anywhere. Serious problems ensue when the human ego becomes obsessed with seizing power over people and lands. As we in America are blessed in many ways, humans are causing unconscionable carnage and destruction against other human beings in other parts of the world, including where Jesus was born and lived.

God used Moses' staff to demonstrate God's power over nature to provide for His people.

Jesus used common things, like dirt and water to help a blind man see. Jesus used his words to get a lame man to stand up and walk. The authority of God was in Christ as He brought a new understanding of bread being symbolic of His body given for us, and wine being symbolic of Jesus' blood being given up for us.

The focus is on God's power and love and His choosing to use common things in this world to achieve unexpectedly good results. God can use anything and anyone to accomplish His purpose of reconciling the world to Himself, and it is never too late to have God use you to transform the world.

Internationally known architect, I.M. Pei, was 86 when he accepted the challenge to design the new Ronald Regan Medical Center in Westwood. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that when he won the design contest, Pei said, "The idea is that architecture, too, can heal, that it can function as a framework for an enlightened community, one that can even uplift the soul."

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Dedicated in June of 2007, this new, modern center is another example of how God can use practical, earthly things, like steel, concrete, glass, and landscaping to create healing and beauty. I. M. Pei is 91 now and still involved in designs that influence modern trends in architecture, which inspire as well as function efficiently. There is truly no limit to what God is able to accomplish. We must not limit what we expect of God to what we 21st Century humans think is reasonable. God is not limited by us, except in what we allow Him to accomplish through us.

When the conductor of an orchestra gives the first down beat to begin the performance, those musicians who are not looking will miss and not play. When the coach looks down the bench to see which player to put in the game, the inattentive player will not be chosen. We need to be ready and able to serve our Lord whenever God calls us and trust God to provide the resources we need to accomplish the purposes He calls us to fulfill.

Moses was actively serving his people when he cried out for the Lord to intervene and save them from their own folly. Moses knew God was with them even when there was no need for miracles as visible proof of the Lord's Presence.

Jesus had the power of God but knew that the lack of belief in a person or persons limited the healing He could do in His own home town of Nazareth, so He went to a nearby town and healed many people there who did believe He was sent by God.

God can use imperfect persons who sometimes may not feel strong and close to God to give encouragement and spiritual strength to someone else. One reason we are a church family is to support one another in deepening and expanding our personal faith in God. In some significant ways, we journey together, and we are strengthened by one another's faith. When one of us is honored, we all are honored; and when one of us falters, we all are diminished.

We are here to help carry one another's burdens and support each one's upward call in Christ Jesus our Lord even when all we have to offer is our own imperfect life which in the Lord's hands may be able to work miracles.

One of the rich sheiks in Aubudaubi was building a great palace in the desert and wanted it to be an unusual and magnificent place to impress all his rich friends. The main courtyard would have an entire wall completely covered by a mirror. The mirror had to be specially made at great expense; shipping had to be done by charter arrangement under great supervision including a specially built container to support the weight while not chipping or damaging the mirror. Finally, the shipment arrived from the ship and was trucked into the desert where the eager contractor had his men gently unpack this centerpiece of the new palace.

But damage had been done. The mirror had a crack from one corner right across the face of the mirror to the other corner. The sheik would be arriving in a week to examine his palace. The contractor had to act fast. Then he did something no one expected.

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He instructed his workmen to take their hammers, break up the mirror into pieces about the size of their hands, and bring them into the grand hall. There he had workmen prepare the wall and piece by piece he created a mirror mosaic across the entire grand entrance wall. Each piece reflected separately, and together they created a dazzling, ever-changing reflection of the fountain and everyone and everything in the great hall.

When the sheik arrived, he was stunned and thrilled. His was a unique centerpiece that became known throughout the region as the Mirror Hall.

Broken things had become beautiful. Could this be like our lives in God's always-creative, loving hands? "It is no secret what God can do. What He's done for others He'll do for you. With arms wide open, He'll pardon you. It is no secret what God can do."

God can bring water to dry lands, food where there is desert, and beauty out of brokenness.

God's intervention can transform the reality in which we live
from despair to hope,
from having no place to go to knowing with God you are always home,
from trying to do everything yourself
to accepting the fact that some things are yours to do,
while other things are rightly lifted up for
God to accomplish in His own way and time.

As we start this New Year and prepare for the annual meeting of the Congregational Church of the Messiah next Sunday, I suggest we remember three facts of faith we can believe and pass on to others.

1. God is always with us not matter where we are or what the circumstances.
2. When we call on the Lord, He will always answer—not necessarily with a miracle—but in His own time and His own way He will answer. If we keep our eyes, ears, and spirit open we will be able to recognize when and how God has chosen to answer our call.
3. God often uses ordinary things through which to bring about the changes we need—even when we may not ask for them.

I close with a recent e-mail received from a church member.

There is a God in the Post Office...Our 14 year-old dog, Abbey, died last month. The day after she died, my four year-old daughter Meredith was crying and talking about how much she missed Abbey. She asked if we could write a letter to God so that when Abbey got to heaven, God would recognize her. I told her that I thought we could so she dictated these words:

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Dear God,

Will you please take care of my dog? She died yesterday and is with you in heaven. I miss her very much. I am happy that you let me have her as my dog even though she got sick.

I hope you will play with her. She likes to play with balls and to swim. I am sending a picture of her so when you see her, you will know that she is my dog. I really miss her.

Love,
Meredith

We put the letter in an envelope with a picture of Abbey and Meredith and addressed it to God/Heaven. We put our return address on it. Then Meredith pasted several stamps on the front of the envelope because she said it would take lots of stamps to get the letter all the way to heaven. That afternoon she dropped it into the letterbox at the post office. A few days later, she asked if God had gotten the letter yet. I told her that I thought He had.

Yesterday, there was a package wrapped in gold paper on our front porch addressed "To Meredith" in an unfamiliar hand.

Meredith opened it. Inside was a book by Mr. Rogers called *When a Pet Dies*. Taped to the inside front cover was the letter we had written to God in its opened envelope. On the opposite page was the picture of Abbey & Meredith and this note:

Dear Meredith,

Abbey arrived safely in heaven.

Having the picture was a big help. I recognized Abbey right away. Abbey isn't sick anymore. Her spirit is here with me just like it stays in your heart. Abbey loved being your dog. Since we don't need our bodies in heaven, I don't have any pockets to keep your picture in, so I am sending it back to you in this little book for you to keep and have something to remember Abbey by.

Thank you for the beautiful letter and thank your mother for helping you write it and sending it to me. What a wonderful mother you have. I picked her especially for you. I send my blessings every day and remember that I love you very much.

By the way, I'm easy to find, I am wherever there is love.

God

The writer concludes: "I have no way to know who sent it, but there is a beautiful soul working in the dead letter office of the US postal service."

Yes, God is among us creating beauty and joy through ordinary people like you and me. Amen.