

Sermon: Semi-Millennial Rummage Sale

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:1-12

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Certain historians and religious scholars have noted in Judeo-Christian western history that there seems to be a remarkable pattern of a massive upheaval that occurs every 500 years. An Anglican Bishop, Rev. Mark Dyer, suggested a good metaphor for this was to think of it as a massive rummage sale that takes place within church and society at these 500 year intervals where the empowered structures of authority must be shattered in order for a significant leap of renewal and growth to occur. Whatever held authority at the time suddenly no longer does and the turn to a new authority must take place.

So 500 years ago it was the Great Reformation that unseated the absolute authority of the Catholic Church of Medieval Europe and the reformers – men and women alike - claimed the true authority was scripture and the individual's priesthood in God. What emerged was Protestantism and wide-scale literacy and the seeds of democracy and capitalism which then helped shape the world for centuries to come. 500 years before that was the Great Schism in 1054 where Eastern and Western Christianity split apart and the previous hegemony of a single power was dismantled and new forms of culture developed. 500 years before that was the fall of the great Roman Empire and the coming of Gregory the Great who established monasteries, which ended up being the keepers of Christianity during the Dark Ages. 500 years earlier was the Great Transformation, the coming of Jesus, so immense an event

that a great portion of the worlds population, believers or not, began keeping a new calendar based upon that date. And if you then look back before that in Judaism you will find 500 years before was the Babylonian captivity, 500 years before that the turning from the time of Judges to the Monarchy of Israel.

All of this is to say that if such striking historical patterns hold any clout for us then we'll take note of where we are right now as a country, as a people, as a world. We are 500 years from the dating of the Great Reformation on October 31st, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church doors in Wittenberg. 2017 - and are we not in another time of great cultural shift and upheaval, that, thanks in large part to the internet - like the printing press of 500 years ago - is a time when again people are asking where does the authority lie? Is it with scripture? Is it with America? Is it with our economic system? In our culture, institutions that once held central authoritative power, like the church or even the government, are losing their trust and authority, the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church or the rapid decline of Mainline Protestant churches - still physically in the center of town but long ago falling out of the authoritative center of the town - those being a couple of religious examples, and the current state of the U.S. presidency and congress being another. Many refer to this time we are in now by the term that one particular scholar, Phyllis Tickle, has used as the title her seminal book called *The Great Emergence*. What exactly is emerging we do not know as we are living through it, but that something new is emerging in religion and society is hard to refute... so it has been labeled the time of the Great Emergence.

The scripture that Laurie read offers a powerful image for us here in the Judeo-Christian West as we stand on the precipice of this Great Emergence. Rewind some 3500 years ago and we come to the time historians designate as when Moses and the Israelites emerged from slavery in Egypt and came into the Promised Land of Israel/Palestine. We remember, as a people of faith, that history is not just the random firing of events nor even a happenstance patterning of events, but that history is going somewhere and being guided towards a final culmination by a Higher Creative Power that we call God. It's true of our individual lives and our corporate lives as a species and a planet.

It can be hard to believe it at times, much like the Israelites in the desert, flailing around aimlessly for 40 years, but what our faith tradition and the scriptures teach us is that they were going somewhere, we are going somewhere, God only knows – but the idea is that desert time of flailing and failing and struggling is critical for us to be ready for what is to emerge. Note the difficult wilderness times in your own life, how out of them emerged something critical that could never have been without it and trust that in our corporate lives as a people as well.

So just as the Israelites stood on the precipice of their great emergence into the Promised Land 3500 years ago, we stand here, 500 years after the Great Reformation preparing for another emergence into a new land, a new world. What will it be? What must be thrown out and where will the new authority lie? 500 years from now, how will they look back on this hinge moment in history? What is emerging around us and through us and where is it all going? Thank God we are not in

control of it all, that it's not up to manage it, as hard as we may try, but it's God's business for us to participate in as best we know how.

So participate we will. We want to end our two-month long Reformation study as it began, remembering what Martin Luther did 500 years ago as he reflected on what needed to change in the Catholic Church and medieval society and then nailed 95 propositions or theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg. We'd like to invite you to take a prayerful moment and write down on the sticky notes provided, two or three reforms that you believe are needed here and now at this juncture in our history. Maybe one note could be offered for a reform in society and one for a reform in the church – and it could be a reform in Christianity in general or this church in particular. And ask yourself not necessarily what reforms would you like to see but what reforms do you imagine God would like to see, what reforms might God be drawing out of us during this semi-millennial rummage sale of a time. Then after a few minutes we'll invite you to come forward and “nail” or stick your reforms on this church door. You can come up when the choir begins to sing their anthem *Dona Nobis Pacem*. So please take a few prayerful moments.