“Go Forward”

Text: Exodus 14: 10 - 31  
Used: Cong. Church of Naugatuck – 9/11/05

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is the day in our church year we call “New Beginnings Sunday”. It is called this for the obvious reason that it is the day we begin our church program year. We begin again with our 10:15 a.m. service schedule. Our Chancel Choir begins singing again. We sign our children up to begin Church School again. There are a lot of new beginnings that happen right now in the life of our church. And to be honest, many months ago, when I first started scoping out what I wanted the focus on in this morning’s service, this is what I wanted to talk about, some new beginnings in our life together as a church. And I will talk to you some more about this in a couple of weeks.

But it seems to me, that even as we gather back together for our New Beginnings Sunday this morning, our focus really isn’t yet on what’s happening in the life our church. And perhaps it shouldn’t be. Our focus is on what has been happening along the Gulf Coast over the last two weeks. And/or our focus is what happened in New York City, Washington D.C. and in Pennsylvania four years ago to the day. And, of course, all of this is if there isn’t some great turmoil in our own lives right now. So in light of where our focus truly is, we are going to talk about new beginnings this morning, but not new beginnings at church. Rather we are going to talk about new beginnings in a far more personal sense. Today, we are going to consider God’s promise of new beginning for us even
during those times when we are hurting and grieving and feeling as though our lives have been turned upside down.

It is a blessing that our lectionary provides for us this morning the penultimate story of new beginnings – the story of the exodus. It is a story that begins with a moment of grace. After four hundred years of bondage to their Egyptian masters, day after day of meaningless drudgery without end and no hope whatsoever that things would ever change, freedom was within their grasp. Even tight-fisted old Pharaoh had given up before that terrible night of Passover. "All right, go! You and the Israelites, leave me and my people in peace! Take what is yours and be gone!" Pharaoh said to Moses. It was the chance everyone had been waiting for. It was the promised new beginning.

It is amazing how quickly things can change isn’t – as we’ve experienced over the past couple of weeks. Well, for the Israelites there first day of freedom was followed by a day of great dread. The Israelites, trying to get as far away from Pharaoh as they could before he changed his mind, ran smack into the Red Sea. Now to understand what this story said to the ancient people who told it over and over, generation to generation, we have to understand how such people understood the sea. Today, we often think of the sea as a peaceful place where we go to rest. But for the people of Moses time, the sea was not seen as peaceful and lovely. It was a symbol of extreme chaos. The sea represented a breakdown of all structure. In fact, the Canaanite religion had a sea god named Yamm who stood for the chaotic power in the world. The sea was seen as an opponent of God. Perhaps, after having seen all the destruction that can be
caused by storm and sea together last week we can empathize some with why the sea was so feared by these people.

Of course, coming up behind the Israelites on the other side was Pharaoh’s army which would at best re-enslave them and perhaps would have them all put to death.

So here were Moses and the people of God: homeless, leaving behind everything they’ve know for generations, carrying what few possession they had with them; and they quickly find themselves trapped by what feels like it will be certain death of both sides. Is it any wonder these people panic? Is there any wonder why these people grow angry and question God?

Now as I read this scripture, I think the whole point of the story rests in God’s response to the fearful question of the Israelites. God says to Moses: “Tell the Israelites to go forward”. Here the Israelites are uprooted, on the run, surrounded by some of their greatest fears and God says to them: “Go forward”. Get going. Move on. However you want to say it. It seems that God isn’t very pastoral here. There’s no “don’t worry”. Not even a “you can trust in me”. Simply the directive “Go forward!”

As we all know, the Israelites do “go forward” and the sea parts. Their escape from oppression takes them right through the middle of what they fear the most. And after they had all made it to the other side, the sea again closed, swallowing up the forces that had so long held them captive. They were for the first time truly free. Yet, they still had a long, long journey ahead of them before they would come upon the land that God promised them.
I personally believe that God’s directive to the Israelites as they fled Egypt is instructive to all of God’s people in time of crisis. As we face tragedy and upheaval, I believe God say to us, “I know your feeling a bit trapped. I know it feels as though there is really no good answer. I now you are grieving what you once had, another time. But nonetheless, you must go forward. Even if it means walking through darkness, walking through the middle of some of your greatest fears, you must go forward. And even though it may not always make the journey easier, you can trust that my presence goes before you.”

Today we remember the events of September 2001 – a day of tremendous tragedy – a day which changed the way many of us understood the world around us. Remembering is good. Remembering is very much a part of our Judeo-Christian tradition. God is always telling the Israelites, “Remember how I was the one that brought you out of bondage in Egypt.” Remembering keeps us informed about why we are who we are. But God asks more of us then just remembering. God ask us to “go forward”. So what do you think? Have we been able to go forward from the events of September 11, 2001? Have we been able to move closer to the land of promise and peace that God has envisioned for us? Or, four years later, do we still find ourselves stuck cornered in by great fears on all sides? I think this is an important question for us to ask ourselves as we remember today.

Along the Gulf Coast there are thousands upon thousands of people who probably feel a lot like the Israelites did in our scripture this morning – as though they have been cast out of their homes by the hand of fate larger then
themselves and sent into the wilderness, not knowing where or when they will again find home. I can’t imagine how terrifying that must be. And I’m sure a whole lot of these people are finding themselves angry and questioning God just like the Israelites did. I have wondered if I was preaching to a church in Gulfport or Biloxi or to a group of evacuees in San Antonio would I be saying the same thing…and you know, I honestly think I would. I’d say to them: “It’s all right to be grieving. And it’s all right to feel depressed. And it’s even all right to be angry…including at God. But nonetheless, we must listen to God’s word that instructs us to go forward, for on the other side of this journey there is a land of hope and promise that God has prepared for us.”

My guess is thought that all these people are going to need some help going forward. And that where we come in. Some of you know that there was a state-wide meeting held last Wednesday of all the Congregational/UCC churches in Connecticut to discuss hurricane relief effort. Let me tell you, it was an amazing meeting. It was one of those times you could see the church truly and fully being the church. Many, many incredible ideas came out of it – too many for me to go into this morning. But I do want to tell you about one of the commitments we made. We, as the Connecticut Conference, decided to adopt a church as a partner church. It would be our effort to not only rebuild that church, but to rebuild the lives of all the families in that church. The really incredible part of this idea is if it can help the people of this church re-establish themselves, then they can help the rest of their community rebuild as those who know the community the best.
The Church we have selected is Center Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in New Orleans. This is an inner-city church located about half a mile from the French quarter. Central Congregational Church was founded in 1872 by the American Missionary Association that grew out of the Amistad Committee whose roots were right here in Connecticut. As you might guess, it is a church that is still underwater and all the congregants are currently out of the city. The pastor, the Rev. Wilmer Brown, is currently living with his sister in Texas.

There are several things we hope to do for this church: assist the church with its rebuilding, support the pastor who during this time when the church isn’t meeting is without income and benefits, and help the members of the church rebuild their lives and homes; One way we hope to have this occur, it by having all our local churches adopt a family to pray for and support. My guess is it will be by doing some of the simplest things that will mean the most – like helping a family that had all of their possessions lost or damaged replace their family Bible. It is in ways such as this, we can put our arms around people a thousand miles away and say to them, “We’re here to help you go forward”.

Of course, crisis doesn’t always happen in big national terms, more often our crises affects only our family or our lives. Today, under my robe I’m wearing a pin I received last night. It says I’m a cancer survivor care giver. You see, I spent I good amount of the night last night with Paige as the Relay for Life in Milford. Relay for life is a walking fundraiser for cancer. At one point in the evening, they turn off all the light on the track and you walk around a track light
by luminaries given in remembrance of those who have had cancer. Before we started that walk, they read a statement about the relay for life happens. And this statement ended with a thought that I found to be incredibly powerful. They said, “After walking in the darkness of cancer for so long, we finally see the dawn rising before us – the dawn of new health or the dawn of rest in God’s care. That is why we walk all night until the dawns light breaks forth.” And I couldn’t help but think, they get it, they know what it means to “go forward”.

I said a while ago the story of the exodus from Egypt is the penultimate story of new beginnings. Of course, the story of the resurrection is the ultimate one. It is an everlasting reminder that there is no darkness, that there is no evil, there is no trauma, that there is no loss that can do away with God’s love for God people. For you see, our faith is based on the promise that there is always a new beginning that comes with the dawn. So during those times when we find ourselves walking the darkness, and during those times when our world seems to be in great crises, may we remember God’s instruction to “go forward” trusting that a new beginning will soon come.

Amen.