

**Yr. A, Proper 6**  
**June 18, 2023**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**Christ Episcopal Church**  
**1565 Words**

**Lessons: Exodus 19:2-8a**  
**Psalms 100**  
**Romans 5:1-8**  
**Matthew 9:35-10:23**

Jesus makes it look easy, doesn't he—going about his business in all those cities and villages, teaching in the synagogues...curing sick people out in the streets. It's easy to celebrate all the good he's doing.

We can understand why a little 'fan club' is starting to form. It's not a surprise, is it? I mean, 'the regular people' are finally seeing what hope looks like. And it doesn't cost a thing. Sign us up! *Right?*

This is not all that different from the 'Moses Fan Club' that sprung up after he led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt with the *full heavenly power of God* on their side. One look back at that Egyptian army—totally devastated—that's all you need to realize you've hitched your wagon to the right horse! Those regular people were finally seeing what hope looked like.

...until they didn't. You see, today's story from the Book of Exodus picks up just *three months later*. The harsh reality of the wilderness has set in. Hunger. Thirst. Danger from other armies. Suddenly, there's *a lot* to complain about. Twice in the previous two weeks, the people just wanted to give up, "We were better off working as slaves, back in Egypt," they fussed. Well, so much for the 'Moses Fan Club.'

What do you do with *your disenchantment* when you come face-to-face with the fear that you're simply not *up* to the challenges ahead of you? This is the case with the Israelites, standing before Mt. Sinai in today's Old Testament story. This is also the case with the twelve disciples, standing before Jesus in today's Gospel story. This is the story of *us*, standing before any sort of overwhelming challenge.

How are we supposed to do what seems easy for God to do, but impossible for us? We hear a lot of Bible stories about the amazing things that God does. Not today, though. Today's lessons are about the impossible-sounding things we are called to do.

There is a ritual many teenagers have gone through during the last century. It generally happens around sixteen years old. I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I did not guide my daughters through this ritual when they were sixteen...because we had already sold our stick shift by then. There was no pressing need for me to teach them the difficult but beautiful art of driving a car with a manual transmission.

You can raise your hand if you taught your teenager to drive a stick shift. Leave your hand up if you didn't wince when they would grind the gears during the trial and error process.

In today's lesson from Exodus, God tells Moses to tell the people the real deal. "I've brought you out here safely all by myself. I've borne you up as if on eagles' wings." It's *your turn* now. "So, obey my voice. Keep *your end* of our covenant (partnership)." And you're going to do just fine.

In other words, God is saying, "You know what my power is like. Use it! It's time...for *you* to put it into gear *for yourself!*"

There once was a father who was teaching his teenage daughter how to drive a stick shift for the very first time. She shall remain nameless because it's critical for our parish administrator to remain on good terms with the rector. (Seriously, I did receive permission to share this!) When Kim's dad took her out for the first lesson, he drove her outside the city of Macon to a rural crossroads with a 4-way stop. His premise was that she could learn on a real road, but 'in peace and quiet.'

You know what happens when you try to drive a stick for the first time. You keep letting the clutch out too fast. And the car chokes down. As Kim struggled to finesse the tension between the gas and the clutch, cars began arriving at that 4-way stop, including one behind them. They just kept waving them through...until my father-in-law finally said, "Give it the gas!"

Kim really revved up the motor and let out the clutch. Miraculously, the car moved through the intersection for the first time. I say miraculously, because what they discovered a few moments later is that she was *already in third gear!*

And this was sort of the problem with the Israelites. Within three short months, they had already suffered hunger, and received manna from heaven. They suffered thirst, and Moses struck a rock from which water gushed out. Then they faced the Amalekite army and managed to survive.

But there was a rapidly growing chorus of doubters and naysayers who wanted to give up, and go back to being slaves in Egypt again.

God is saying, "NO! You are *better than that*. You're more valuable than that! You shall be for me a priestly kingdom...a holy nation. *Now get it into gear and get moving!*"

Kim's second lesson outside Macon involved starting from zero. This time in 1<sup>st</sup> gear...*but on a slope*. Even experienced drivers get nervous trying to start out on a hill. Not only do you have to manage the tension between the gas pedal and the clutch, but you also have to do it quickly. You've already guessed what happened. An oblivious driver approached them from behind and came to a stop way too close for comfort.

Well, this is precisely the kind of pressure that Jesus' twelve disciples must feel when he looks at them and essentially says, "*Your turn!*" I mean, sure, Jesus made it all look easy, *but he's also the Son of God!* These are people like you and me, being told to do things that seem impossible.

Notice that Jesus gave them the authority they *needed*, but he did *not give them* the certainty they probably *wanted*...because Jesus is not in the 'certainty business,' he's in the 'faith business'...where questions and doubts are always okay. They're not just *okay*, they're normal. And often, I don't think it's actually God whom we doubt; it's *ourselves*.

I imagine Jesus speaking calmly to his twelve disciples, saying, "Proclaim the Good News that the Kingdom of heaven has come near."

"*Okay*," I can see myself nodding with acceptance.

Jesus goes on. "Cure the sick."

"*Hmmm*. I'll give it a shot." But wait, there's more!

"Raise the dead," Jesus says. And that's when I'm out. No *way* can I do that. Jesus still isn't finished. "Cleanse the lepers," he says, "And cast out demons." This is the moment we realize that we cannot be effective ministers at a safe, sterile distance...as we would like.

Nope. Jesus has put us on a *real road*. He's assigned us a steep hill that seems like an impossible place to start. *And* he's allowing people to get uncomfortably close to us. That's when he says, "It's time to put it into gear and get moving."

"But Lord, I don't have enough faith...or knowledge...or money...or time...or..." (what is your excuse when you feel nervous)?

Kim didn't make it on the first try. The engine choked. The car rolled backward and bumped the car behind them. She and her dad got out and apologized. The other driver understood, so he backed up and went on around. Kim got back into the driver's seat and did it.

This is our story, y'all. Following the compassionate way of Jesus is hard. Engaging the power of *Christ's* faith and hope and love might even seem impossible. That's okay, it seemed just as hard...just as impossible...to the first twelve disciples.

The Good News today, I think, is most visible in St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul endured what seemed impossible, and so he writes from experience.

The most important thing for us to hear is that we already have peace with God. It's a *gift*. Be thankful! The second most important thing for us to hear is that we have hope of actually sharing the glory of God. That's *another gift*. Be thankful!

The reality is...that in addition to these two gifts, there is *still* suffering. And there's no way around it.

But here's the truth. It's the truth of the Israelites who took *forty years* to make it into the Promised Land, but they *did it*. It's the truth of those first twelve disciples who needed all the strength and courage they could muster, and they *found it*. It's the truth of the miraculously forgiving, faithful people of Mother Emmanuel AME Church, and they are *living it*.

It's the truth we've seen with our own eyes, and heard with our own ears, and experienced within our own hearts and so we know of what we speak when we recite these words of St. Paul.

Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. Character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because the love of God has been *poured* into our hearts.

Not drizzled. Not sprinkled. **POURED! POURED** into *our hearts* through the Holy Spirit.

You see what this means, right? Just like the Israelites and the twelve disciples, we can do more than just *believe in God*. We can *also* believe in *ourselves*. We can believe that the full power of God is available...not just *for us*...but *within us*, *revved up* and *ready* to be engaged.

We just need to get it into gear. And pop the clutch.

So, be joyful in the LORD! Serve the LORD *with gladness*.

Now, let's get moving!

Amen.