

***STUDIES IN EXODUS: THE PEOPLE WERE RESTRAINED FROM GIVING***  
**A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH**  
**JANUARY 21, 2007–STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY**  
**TENTH IN A SERIES**  
**THE LESSON FOR THE DAY–EXODUS 35:20-29; 36:2-7**  
**WILLIAM A. EVERTSBERG**

*Good Lord, on our own, we conclude:  
that there is not enough to go around,  
that we are going to run short:  
of money  
of love  
of grades  
of publications  
of sex  
of beer  
of members  
of years  
of life  
we should seize the day,  
seize the goods  
seize our neighbor's goods  
because there is not enough to go around.  
And in the midst of our perceived deficit,  
you come giving bread in the wilderness;  
You come giving children at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour;  
You come giving homes to exiles;  
You come giving futures to the shut-down;  
You come giving Easter joy to the dead.  
And we watch while the blind receive their sight  
the lame walk  
the deaf hear  
the poor dance and sing.  
We watch and we take food we did not grow  
and life we did not invent  
and future that is gift and gift and gift  
and families and neighbors who sustain us when we do not deserve it.  
By your giving, break our cycles of imagined scarcity,  
override our presumed deficits,  
and help us to see the abundance:  
mercy upon mercy,  
blessing upon blessing.*

–Walter Bruegemann

**C**an you believe how beautifully the book of Exodus has set me up for Stewardship Sunday? How's this for a softball on one of the hardest Sundays of the year? This is an uncontested lay-up for LeBron James; this is a home-run on a Little League field for Barrie Bonds; this is asking Renee Fleming to sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star;" this is the Dallas Cowboys lining up for a last-minute, 19-yard field goal against the Seattle Seahawks...oh wait, bad example. Even the best can miss a two-foot putt, so no guarantees, but what a great story for Stewardship Sunday.

On their journey from slavery in Egypt to promise in Canaan, which will, as it turns out, take forty years, the Hebrews decide that they need a traveling church for God to live in along the way. It may seem like a small thing to you, but it sure wasn't to them. After rushing at breakneck speed to tell a potboiler of a tale jam-packed with sex, violence, death, military exploits, twists, turns, and terrifying theophanies cloaked in thunder, lightning and volcanic activity, the Book of Exodus slows to a glacial pace at this point in the narrative to tell us about the Tabernacle, a portable tent you pitch and strike, pitch and strike, pitch and strike, all along the way so God will never abandon you out there in the killing wilderness. In fact, the book of Exodus will take ten chapters and almost 8000 words, or twelve single-spaced pages, three times the length of this sermon, to share with us every trivial detail of the Tabernacle's construction. This Tabernacle was a very big deal to these wandering Hebrews.

It might surprise you to learn, then, that it was after all a rather modest little domicile for the Creator of all the stars and worlds, about 15'x45' actually, or just a little larger than one of those nifty six-person tents you can buy from L. L. Bean for about \$200. It was, of course, appointed not of polyester and aluminum but with the richest accoutrements, and the inordinate attention the Bible devotes to this traveling sanctuary tells us how much the Hebrews cared about their sacred spaces and holy things.

Moses puts out the word that they're going to build this thing with whatever is available to a bunch of dusty nomads marooned in the desert, which can't be much except that, remember, when the Hebrews left Egypt Pharaoh was so eager to get rid of them he sent them off with a rich plunder of gold, coin, jewelry and fine fabric, so rich in fact that Pharaoh later regretted his decision and chased them down in the desert with his chariots to disastrous result in the

waters of the miraculously but briefly parted Red Sea. So these dusty nomads might not have much but they have something, and the something they have goes straight to God. Are you listening?

The people's response to Moses' Stewardship Sermon is overwhelming: "their hearts were stirred," the Bible tells us, and everybody and her sister-in-law brings armfuls of gold jewelry, purple yarn, goat-hair linen, leather hides, sterling silver tea sets, and the family furniture to the Tabernacle artisans, who are inundated with an embarrassment of riches. Moses finally has to tell them to stop. It's like when we have a Tag Sale at the church; we finally have to say, "Stop! Enough! No more!" Except that this is not moldy cast-offs from your attic but the finest stuff the people own. Finally, "the people were restrained from giving," the Bible tells us. They had to call a premature halt to the Stewardship Campaign because the people gave too much.

That crafty Moses: when God asks him from the burning bush to go to Pharaoh's palace and convince Pharaoh to free the Hebrew slaves, Moses complains that he is exactly the wrong man for the job because he stutters and flunked Speech class in high school, but now at his first Stewardship Sermon he turns out to be more persuasive than Winston Churchill, a better preacher than Billy Graham, and more charming than Bill Clinton. The people had to be restrained from giving. I am green with envy. These are nomads with nothing, but what little they have goes straight to God. Are you listening?

I'm actually not going to do that this morning: restrain you from giving. Shucks, right? But I will tell you that in the last year, I have seen this congregation dump trunk-loads of riches at the church's doorstep, the modern equivalent of gold jewelry, leather hides, goat-hair linen, and purple fabric. In December Don Hibbard was working 16 hours a day all month. Do you know what he was doing? He wasn't at the construction site; he was at the computer; he couldn't keep up with the stock transactions pouring in, for both capital contributions and regular pledges to the operating budget.

You'd go looking for him in his office and you couldn't find him but he was in there somewhere buried under piles of cash and checks and stock certificates. Don says the 2006 year-end results are the best he's seen in the nine years he's presided over, and that happened while we were in the wilderness with no temple and only temporary tabernacles

like Eagle Hill, Eastern Middle, 470 West Avenue and 76 Progress Drive. Oh, yes, it's true, during darker days an extremely generous and extremely anonymous donor rescued us with a \$120,000 challenge grant, and we can't expect another serendipity like that, but the fact is, we *made* it; *you* made it. Moses asked and there you came.

It's not as if our homelessness has been painless. Forty-two families who pledged in 2005 did not pledge in 2006; that's about 15%; one in six of us took a sabbatical from giving in 2006. Yet, those of you who did pledge gave \$145,000 more; 10% more from 15% fewer pledges. The average pledge rose from \$3700 to \$4700, 25%. Our per capita giving rose from \$1600 in 2005 to \$1900 in 2006. Do you know what the average Presbyterian contributes to the church in the United States? I looked it up: it's \$900. We give more than twice the national average. Now, my colleagues in Sioux Falls will be quick to point out, of course, that our average household income is four times the national average, but I think I'll concentrate on that other statistic.

And we can't quit now. In fact, we've only just begun. The Tabernacle is but prologue to the grander Temple. Do you understand that as a congregation we are facing the opportunity of a generation? Something like this happens about twice a century; this is the third time in the 125-year history of our congregation. We have the chance to plant an eloquent and faithful witness to God at the top of Greenwich Avenue. God is at the top of Greenwich Avenue. True, God always *was* at the top of Greenwich Avenue, at least since 1887, but with that steeple even more now.

God is at the top of Greenwich Avenue. Travel south on Greenwich Avenue and it's all downhill from here, literally. It's all downhill from here. No offense to the fine merchants down the avenue, but we have the chance to speak truth and justice to a culture drying up for want of them, and you know how easy it is for truth and justice to get lost in all that fashion and style down the avenue: at Saks where you can spend \$5000 on a dress or Richard's where you can get a \$3000 suit or Tiffany's where you can buy a \$10,000 necklace or Victoria's Secret where you can get...well, I wouldn't know.

What we have here is a twice-a-century opportunity. Now, what are we going to put under that steeple? How will we live? What will we preach and teach in its shadow? It's a bigger home; it will demand a bigger program and a grander

witness and a more ambitious budget. It'll take more cash; it'll take your generosity; it'll take your sacrifice.

You only need two things to build a generous congregation: you need the means and you need the heart, and I know you've got both because I've seen them. I know you have the means. I read *The Wall Street Journal* the other day. I found out that helium was up and feathers were down. Paper was stationary. Elevators rose and escalators continued their slow decline. Mining equipment hit rock bottom and the market for raisins dried up. Balloon prices were inflated and Coca-Cola fizzled.<sup>1</sup>

I also found out that Wall Street had its best year in history. Many of you work there. As one journalist put it, anybody who works on Wall Street this year died and went to bonus heaven.<sup>2</sup> Maserati dealers and real estate agents are jumping up and down with glee. So I know you've got the means. I also know you have the heart. I know you operate out of what Walter Brueggemann in all his writings calls a "theology of abundance." Walter Brueggemann may be the most accomplished English-speaking scholar of the Hebrew Bible alive today, and he's one of ours, a Presbyterian. A while back he retired from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Don't you just love that prayer of his we prayed a few moments ago in which he shows the difference between a theology of abundance and a theology of scarcity? Sometimes we think that there's never enough to go around, that we're going to run short: of money, of love, of sex, of beer. And we're tempted to operate out of a theology of scarcity, we're tempted to seize the day, seize the goods.

But then we look deep into our own hearts and far back into our own experiences and we discover that we have never known want for a single day. We see that God has never been very far away. We see that God gives "bread in the wilderness and children at the eleventh hour and homes to exiles and futures to the shut-down and Easter joy to the dead. And we watch while the blind receive their sight and the lame walk and the deaf hear and the poor dance and

---

<sup>1</sup>This is not original and my apologies to the author, whom I cannot further identify.

<sup>2</sup>Jenny Anderson, "Visions of Bonus Heaven in Goldman Sachs Profits," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2006.

sing.”<sup>3</sup>

And then that theology of abundance kicks in and overwhelms that theology of scarcity as we discover that there will always be enough to go around, and then a spirit of generosity kicks in too as we realize that though we have worked very hard and made as much of our little selves and small talents as it's possible to make, still we did not earn and do not deserve the multiplicity of benedictions with which God has littered the path of our lives. We remember that “we take food we did not grow and life we did not invent and future that is gift and gift and gift and families and neighbors who sustain us when we do not deserve it.”<sup>4</sup> And it takes our breath away when we notice that we have been carried to blessing on a tidal wave of unmerited fecundity and extravagant grace, and we stop short and furrow our brow and wonder how we could ever express a proper gratitude for all this, for all this, and then it occurs to us, “Oh, yeah, I could give some of it back.”

Several years ago a little nondescript guy named Morris Silverman walked into the dean's office at Albany Medical College and insisted on meeting the boss. The dean didn't have time for this old guy in wrinkled khakis and a short-sleeve shirt, so he passed the guy off to the chairman of the board, and the chairman listened to the guy as he unleashed an eccentric spiel about turning the Albany Medical College into an international center of health and education. Then the guy walked out.

Six weeks later the chairman opened a letter from Mr. Silverman which also contained a check for a million dollars. He called Mr. Silverman to ask, “What's it for?” and Mr. Silverman replied, “So that you'll always return my phone calls.” Mr. Silverman is the son of a Jewish tailor who immigrated to Troy, New York, from Poland in the early years of the twentieth century. When Mr. Silverman's father arrived in Troy, the Jewish community set him up with a sewing machine and an iron. Mr. Silverman went to law school, fought in World War II, earned a pile of money buying used cars from the government and reselling them to car dealers. To support his family while attending

law school, he opened a gas station and Jews from miles around would drive over to fill their tanks to help him out. Now he's old and everything he has is in a charitable foundation and he spends his time finding ways to give his money away.<sup>5</sup> What else could you possibly do when you take food you did not grow and life you did not invent and families and neighbors who sustain us when we do not deserve it? What's your story of colossal indebtedness and unspeakable gratitude?

Preachers rarely fare well in literature. Often the villain and rarely the hero, preachers are usually sanctimonious or hypocritical and sometimes both. Most prominently, there are Hawthorne's Arthur Dimmesdale and Lewis' Elmer Gantry, and Anthony Trollope has a whole stable of vile clerics. Once I stop to think about it, preachers don't come off very well in the news either. Jimmy Swaggart, Bernard Law, and Ted Haggard spring instantly to mind. Sometimes it even happens around here.

But every once in a while... For instance, there's always Monsieur Charles-Francois-Bienvenu Myriel. Do you know that name? He's the first character we meet in Hugo's *Les Miserables*, introduced in the first sentence of my 1,463-page edition. When the story opens, he is the Bishop of Digne, the kind cleric who spins the whole intricate narrative of *Les Miserables* down its twisting path by granting grace to Jean Valjean and bequeathing him those twin candlesticks. He is a saint. He launches the whole elaborate saga. Near the very beginning of the whole winding story, Hugo writes of him, “When he had money, he visited the poor. When he had none, he visited the rich.”<sup>6</sup>

Well, I'm a cleric too, and guess what? I have none, so I am visiting the rich. When I get some from you, I will visit the poor. Okay?

---

<sup>3</sup>*Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, ed. by Anna Carter Florence, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 3 - 4.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

---

<sup>5</sup>Jan Hoffman, “In Life's Give and Take, Giving Is Better,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2004.

<sup>6</sup>Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*, trans. Lee Fahnestock & Norman MacAfee (New York: New American Library, 1987, first published 1862), p. 18.