

Back to the Basics

Exodus 20:1-17, Matthew 22:34-40

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Third Sunday of Lent

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It's a dark, March morning. My alarm goes off at 4:45 am. I hurry to shut it off, so I don't wake my roommate. I slip out from the covers, feeling for my clothes at the end of the bed—a t-shirt, warm-up pants, a windbreaker, a hat. I put them on, grab my car keys, and head out into the cool Virginia air. I meet up with my teammates, and together we drive down to the docks. When we arrive, we can see the mist rising off College Creek and a heron preening on the shoreline.

In the quiet, we get the boat off the racks, marching in step until we lay it on the water. We retrieve our oars, take off our shoes, step into the boat, and push off.

“Bow four,” says our coxswain, “paddle us out.”

Her words echo across the water as my four teammates behind me start rowing. I feel the wind push against my back. It is good to be on the water again.

We haven't been on the water for four months. The last time was for our final fall regatta. We were in Philadelphia, racing against 64 other colleges, and by some miracle we had won the race.

And yet to look at us on this March morning, you never would have guessed we were a championship team. Four months off the water had made us rusty. Our boat was tipping from side to side. Our rhythm was off.

“Ok, ladies,” said our coxswain. “It's time to go back to the basics. Let's see if we can get this boat set.”

So on that morning, and at every practice for the next few weeks, we drilled the fundamentals—practicing our oars entering the water at the same time, making sure we were all pushing down with our legs at the same speed, assuring we flipped our oars in the same motion.

It would be weeks before we built up any speed, or practiced our racing starts, or demonstrated our fancy ways of turning our boat around. To be the best rowers we could be, to be the best team we could be, we had to go back to the basics.

It was a good lesson. And it's one that I've gone back to again and again. In life. In sermon writing. In cooking. In faith. Keep it simple, or when in doubt, go back to the basics.

In our worship and second hours this Lent, we are talking about fear and uncertainty, about how our faith helps us cope with fear and uncertainty. I think one way our faith helps us is by reminding us to go back to the basics.

What are the things that are truly important to us? What are the things that give our life meaning? What do we need for our well-being and wholeness?

These are questions that our faith asks of us. And these are questions we ask anytime we face uncertainty.

Take economic uncertainty. Many of us are in economic crunches. Losing jobs. Losing retirement funds. And these losses force us to re-evaluate. What is most important to us? What do we really need, and what can we live without? Are the 221 cable channels necessary, or can we drop down to just basic cable, or maybe to no TV at all? Is a vacation to Tahiti a must, or even a trip to the North Shore, or can we find ways to relax and rejuvenate closer to home? Economic uncertainty invites us back to the basics.

The uncertainty of illness does this, too. When we are sick, when someone we love is sick, the mundane things pale in comparison. Does it matter if our work gets done for the day? Does it matter if our outfit matches? Does it matter if we have to pay full price for a plane ticket to reach someone we love?

Chances are, these things don't matter. What does matter is that we or those we love try to get well, that we or those we love have people in our lives to support us and care for us. The trivial things in life fall away, and we focus on the things that are really important.

In the face of fear, in the face of uncertainty...in the face of economic collapse or environmental catastrophe...in the face of wars and violence or anxieties that wake us up in the middle of night, our faith invites also invites us back to the basics.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.' I am the Lord your God, who has covenanted with you because I want you to be whole, because I want you to flourish, because I have created you for good and wonderful things. And here are the things you can do that will give you the most life: Love me. Love yourself. Love others."

Our texts this morning remind us of the basics to our faith, the basics of our lives. The Ten Commandments are not simply a moral rulebook, they are a sign of God's covenant with God's people—a covenant to maintain a life that is healthy, whole, and flourishing.

Even though the Israelites will go on to add 603 more laws—laws about diet and clothing, about marriage and purification—it's these ten that are the basics, that draw them back to the core of their faith and their well-being.

Love God by putting God first and opening ourselves to God's love. Love God by not making idols—like wealth or health. Love God by not speaking ill of God. Love ourselves by giving ourselves rest and keeping Sabbath. Love others by honoring our parents, by not coveting what our neighbor has, by not lying or stealing.

It's a good list for a good life.

A few thousand years later, Jesus gives a Cliff Notes version to the Ten Commandments. In the world of fear and uncertainty that he lived in, a world of occupation and oppression, of violence and ethnic hatred, when the disciples ask Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus says, "It's back to the basics—'Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.'"

What is a basic message of our faith? Love.

Faith, and therefore love, is designed for our well-being. Fear is designed for our undoing. When we live out of fear, when we let fear choke us, we close ourselves off to the life of love and covenant that God intends for us. We end up consumed by our worries. But when live out of love, we open ourselves to new possibilities and awareness, and we find ways of being whole even in the midst of uncertainty.

Think of some of the things that bring you love in your life, or open you up to God's love. Maybe it's certain people or your family or music. When we are especially fearful, especially uncertain, it can be helpful to seek those things that embody or remind us of love in our lives.

I have a prayer shawl that does this. When I moved a few years ago, one of the ministers at my church gave me a prayer shawl. It was purple and warm, and she told me to wrap it around my shoulders and remember God's love. The shawl sits in my study even now, and whenever I place it over my shoulders, I do remember God's love and the love of the people in that church. Whatever fears or uncertainties are gripping me that day lose a bit of their hold.

It's back to the basics.

And loving ourselves. That's a basic, too. Practicing Sabbath is a wonderful antidote to fear and uncertainty. As embodied people with limited energy, rest and restoration are some of the best gifts we can give ourselves. Sleeping. Eating healthy. Giving our minds a break from worrying. When we love ourselves in this way, we prevent fear and uncertainty from consuming us.

What are the things that give you rest? A day off work? A walk in the woods? A practice of meditation?

A former spiritual director of mine once taught me a trick about Sabbath for the mind. She told me that she often had trouble sleeping at night because she would wake up worrying about the concerns in her life. So she began to imagine a box next to her bed, and sometimes she would even put a box next to her bed. Each night, as she got into bed, she prayed, "God, I'm putting my worries in this box. I'm done holding them for today, and you can hold them now. I'll pick them back up in the morning."

That was how she found rest for her spirit. That was how she loved herself in the midst of worry. Get a good night's sleep.

It's back to the basics.

And then there's that whole matter of loving others, another basic part of our faith. As we learned in second hour last week, one of the best things we can do in times of fear and uncertainty is reach out to a neighbor...to take that mission trip to Guatemala, to knit a prayer shawl for someone in our community, to volunteer at a soup kitchen or a day care...to do something that gets us out of ourselves, out of our own worries, and helps us remember that even in the midst of fear, we still have something to give.

It's back to the basics.

Wholeness, life, flourishing, freedom from fear and uncertainty come when we pursue that for which we were made—love. Love for God, love for ourselves, love for each other.

And really these loves are all intertwined. When we are open to the love of God, we are open to loving ourselves and others. When we are well rested and seeking wholeness in ourselves, we are much more inclined to love others and much less inclined to hurt our neighbor. And when we are loving God and taking care of ourselves and seeking the very best for our neighbor, then our fears and uncertainties lose some of their power.

It's basic all right, but sometimes those fundamentals are the hardest things to remember. And sometimes they are the best things to practice.

There are times in our lives and in our world when our boats are not set, when the waters surge, and despite all our rowing, our ship rocks back and forth, threatening to dump us in the seas.

But that's when our faith calls to us, quietly, calmly. We don't have to white knuckle this trip. We stop, take a deep breath, and we remember what's really important. Love. Rest. Being kind to other people. And then we put our oars back into the water and pull once again.

Fear and uncertainty invite us to take stock of what's really important. And our faith points us to what those things are. What gives you life? What brings you love? What helps you rest? What makes you whole?

These are the basics that will get us through the difficult times.

Amen.