

**Sermon—The Unexpected Benefits of a Delayed Blessing**  
**Exodus 13:17-22 and James 1:2-4**  
**St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church**  
**July 29, 2012—Rev. Sheila Sholes-Ross**

**Exodus 13:17-22**

17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.”

18 So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle.

19 And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.”

20 They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.

21 The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.

22 Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

**James 1:2-4**

2 My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it noting but joy,

3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance;

4 and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

I just love the Exodus story, since for me, it’s a love story. Why a love story? How can it not be? The story’s central theme is about a community of people, the Hebrews, held in bondage in Egypt by Pharaoh; but, with Moses, their able-bodied leader (under the guidance of God) directs and leads them through a very difficult journey to a land of promise. Yes, this is a love story since the main focal point is about deliverance of the Hebrews, by a God of History, Who loves the people dearly. The Exodus story delves into on-going acts (by the Hebrews) of disobedience and repentance, and then there is God, always ready to provide restoration to a repentant people. Again, how can it not be a love story? For God was constantly showing God’s Love-Self to the Hebrews who were constantly whining and complaining...but aren’t we like that sometimes?...especially when we just can’t control the situations we live through. But God remains faithful in spite of our complaining and worrying about the inability to make things happen when we want to them to occur. This love story shows how God provides even when we don’t think there are provisions being made.

**“Roundabout ways and Blessing Delays.”**

Let me share with you another interesting love story that involves whining and complaining. My mother, who was a businesswoman and owner of a beauty parlor here in New

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Orleans only had one day off to run household errands; and that day was on a Monday. As a little girl during the summer months off from school I was able to go with her to complete those errands. How I loved those Mondays having my mother all to myself because my dad was working, my brother was married and living in California; and my sister, well she is seven (7) years older than I and had her own world of stuff to do. So there I was, the baby girl having my Mom all to myself. Now, with that, I want you to picture a ten year old, who, on those Mondays was usually whining and complaining to her mother about the route to take to run her errands.

I always wanted to take the route that passed in front of a certain church; yes, this church, St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church since I was inquisitive about the church. Although it was a Monday, I wanted to see if I could notice anything about this church, since for whatever reason, I was drawn to it. I was at my church on Sunday morning so I missed out on seeing people entering here on Sunday mornings; but just maybe, I could see some type of action on Mondays. I was interested in knowing if St. Charles Avenue Baptist was anything like First African Baptist of the 6<sup>th</sup> District...my home church. This building was just so intriguing and beautiful that I wanted to come inside and see if it was as beautiful inside as it looked outside...both churches were big Baptist churches. So I wanted to see how they were alike. For me, as a ten year old, it didn't make any difference to me that the church I attended was all black and St. Charles Avenue Baptist was all white, so my mother told me; all I could focus on was that that they were both big Baptist churches, and I wanted to see what was going on. However, during our excursions on Mondays, my mother would always ask, "Sheila, why do you want to go that way since it's taking us out of the way to run my first errand?" Every week it was the same conversation and argument.

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**“Roundabout ways and Blessing Delays.”**

Now in our Exodus text, we see the Israelites after having crossed the Red Sea, taking an indirect route to the Promised Land of Canaan. God does not allow the Israelites to enter into the Promise Land via the direct route through Philistine country; because had they done so the Israelites would have had to pass Shur, the Egyptian wall that protected the Northeast highways out of Egypt. This wall was heavily guarded and could be passed only with great difficulty. If the Israelites would have successfully crossed the border, further opposition could be anticipated from the Philistines. We are told that the people marched like a strong army. Not haphazardly, but in formation that ensured that even though the people were taking the long way around it was done so in an orderly fashion. Why? Can you imagine hundreds of thousands of people not being in order? God was allowing them to grow through the discipline of the wilderness, so that when they were strong enough physically and mentally they would be able to come into open conflict with any formidable foes.

Did the Israelites know they were being directed the long way to reach entrance into the “Promise Land?” They probably did. They wondered (just as we do today), “Why so many delays?” And, we today, can empathize and understand their plight in wanting to get to the “Land of Milk and Honey” as quickly as possible; for the Israelites had suffered long enough under the Pharaoh in Egypt. We can fully understand since we know how it feels to need and want important blessings...those blessings from God that are viewed as life altering, lifesaving, sanity-saving. Plus, it doesn’t help us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we live in an “instant society.” We want our needs to be met as soon as we identify them as being “very necessary.”

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But in our text describing the Israelites' pilgrimage, we see how God does not hold the "Chosen People's" weaknesses and complaining spirits against them. God knows they may become discouraged, but even if the route takes longer, it's safer for the people's well-being. Again, this was God's Provision; a provision of protection. And although the Israelites were going to Canaan the long way around, Moses maintained his promise to Joseph to "carry Joseph's bones" into the new land. Here, I believe we see how important it is even when there are "blessing" delays in one's life, we must try do our very best to maintain "solemn vows;" our word to others. Whether it's dealing with something as simple as fulfilling a promise to check in with someone through a visit or telephone call; or allowing someone to know that "we" are alright when our journey has become difficult. Keeping our word is important since it is truly a badge of honor.

Then the part of the text that I truly marvel at is how God displays God's-Self as a "Pillar of Cloud" during the day and a "Pillar of Fire" during the night to the Israelites. This theophany of God's visible appearance allows the Israelites to experience God physically. Don't we often make the statement, "God, please, just allow me to see Your Presence in some form during this difficult time...this wilderness experience!" I know I have.

Can you identify with going a roundabout way, praying with faith, and waiting on that blessing that "you" feel is delayed? How do we respond when we are mandated to take the long way around to an end goal? How can we acquire a sense of peace during our marching times of walking through a painful journey that appears will never end? How do we hold on?

I truly believe James' text helps us in this area. It tells us that we should be "joyous" during those "wilderness roundabout" periods. However, let's admit, doing this is very difficult.

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But if we are able to “walk through” the difficulty...we will get to the other side; that other side that is according to God’s Sovereign Plan. We can’t do it alone. We must seek help...share with friends our pain; seek professional counseling, continue to pray to God; and don’t feel guilty when you can’t pray. Just hold onto the mantra that perceived delayed blessings will build faith—helping us to endure and mature as Christians. The hardest part is “holding on.”

One of my favorite screenplay writers, Nora Ephron died last month. She was brilliant with a dry wit and wrote the screenplays of two of my favorite movies: *Heartburn* and *When Harry Met Sally*. As I read her obituary, I was disappointed to discover that she didn’t believe in a higher power, and she also hated sermons that focused on “everything in life happens for a reason” which is my focal point for this sermon. It didn’t help that around the same time, I was counseling a 36 year old woman, with a strong faith in God, who was walking through some needed delayed blessings. When I mentioned to her I was working on a sermon about “delayed blessings,” and began to go into aspects of what I thought was going to be an exceptional counseling session, she threw me for a loop when she said, “Alright name one.” She was telling me to name a benefit when God appears not to answer prayers when you’re going through trials. And at that time, I just knew she couldn’t handle me saying “It was a lesson from God.” And what I had read about Ephron didn’t help. So I just prayed quietly and earnestly and pleaded with the Holy Spirit to help me provide a response. And God was faithful since there are times to be quiet in pastoral counseling, but, this was not one of those times.

I looked at her and said, “One benefit may be that of protection from God—learning how to hold on to a trust in God, Who in history, was faithful to the Israelites. That God, through the resurrected Jesus Christ, is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The Bible tells us so!

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Therefore, that same God will take care and provide for you. It's holding on to the hope that if you can just make it through, you will grow because you have endured. You will have a testimony! Also, there's a strong possibility that you will see the appearance of God through the difficulty because God truly loves 'you' and wants you to see something that is just for you. I told her to remember past victories she had made it through; those other trials and God's deliverance...the character that is now within her." She accepted and believed in the response.

**“Roundabout ways and Blessing Delays.”**

So, sorry, Nora Ephron, I believe things in life do occur for a reason only known by God in God's Sovereignty. Life does not allow us to have “All Happy Days,” even if we have fame, money, access to resources, etc. Life just does not allow for everything to go as planned; as we have prayed for or hoped for. Why? Because it's life. It's difficult to surrender and let go...especially when the path designed for us (by God) does not go in the direction as to what we had prayed for; dreamed about; hoped for, believed and had faith in.

But let's remember, the Israelites did reach the Promised Land; although it was through a roundabout way. God still made the provision and the promise was fulfilled. Brother James tells us to find joy in our trials and I've shared a way or two as to how to “hold on.” But, I need to return to the story about my mother and our weekly errand pilgrimage.

**“Roundabout ways and Blessing Delays.”**

One day Momma just came out and asked me, “Sheila, what is so special about this church?” My response was: “I just want to go in there Momma...I don't know why, but I want to see what happens in there.” Well, I never did come, until now.

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Upon completion of seminary and ordination, I prayed to God for two childhood friends who are clergy, with churches here in New Orleans to invite me to preach...you know, a prophet being invited back to “her” hometown...well, for whatever reason it has not occurred. But God, back some 46 years ago, heard the voice of a little 10 year old girl saying, “I just want to see what goes on in that Baptist church...St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church.”

**The Unexpected Benefits of a Delayed Blessing.**

Why any blessing delays? Only God knows the answer to that question. But through many of my “perceived blessing delays” God has protected me and shielded from unknown dangers as only God could foresee...God has grown me and developed me in order for me to be able to stand during the difficult times, as a witness and testimony...God has taught me how to trust in God’s Sovereign Plan although I did not understand. God does the same for all who are in relationship with the God of History. But you must be in a loving relationship with God. Trust the delay—in trusting a delay we are trusting God—trusting that the God of History is making a way out of no way. The blessing may not look as we had envisioned it to look, but it will be the blessing benefit of an “All-Wise God.”

And hold on to what the hymnologist said in a very familiar hymn: “When peace, like a river, attendeth my way; When sorrows like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say; It is well, it is well with my soul. Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come; Let this blest assurance control, That Christ has regarded my helpless estate, And hath shed His own blood for my soul. It is well...with my soul...It is well, it is well with my soul.”