

Today we continue our series *Virtue Renews the World* meditating on the virtue of faith. Three weeks remain in this series. In these final three Sundays we will focus on the virtues of faith, hope, and love. You may recognize those virtues from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Theologians have named this trio of virtues the theological virtues. In other words, you can summarize the Christian life with the virtues of faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love, of course, the pinnacle of all virtue. Fittingly, we will meditate on love on All Saints Day.

Before I address the virtue of faith this morning, I want to construct a bridge from last week's focus on goodness in the story of Joseph. And there's a reason for this. As we near the end of this series on virtue in worship, we'll begin a pledge campaign in November for next year's parish budget. Now I'll speak on this subject again after the *Virtue* series, but I don't want to separate giving and generosity from our *faith* and the virtuous life.

In the story of Joseph, we witness a life of persistent, creative, and proactive goodness. Here was a man who was generous towards his brothers in time of need. When a famine hit Canaan, Joseph sent his brothers back home with bags full of food. When Egypt cried out for bread, Joseph provided for the needs of his people with great generosity.

From ancient patriarchs like Joseph to the first sons and daughters of the Church in Acts, who were known for their 'glad and generous hearts,' the people of God practice goodness by their generosity. We teach the biblical discipline of tithing 10% of our income to the church. Tithing is a key part of our Member Covenant. But tithing is only the beginning of generosity. We don't tithe as a begrudging duty. We give from gratitude. We give generously because God is good.

And the church is called to be a wise steward like Joseph—to exercise prudence and care for the resources that come into the storehouse of God's church. Tithes and offerings are a sacred trust. We talk about that sacred trust among the Vestry, who oversees the church's resources. But both in the giving and the wise management of resources, our goal is modeling the

goodness of God and his heart for mission.

Goodness to others must come from the heart and generosity comes from the heart. That's what Jesus said in today's Gospel lesson when he said, 'Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' Give God your heart, your whole self! That's what Jesus says. And let all the resources available to you—time, talent, finances, energy, and prayer—be an expression of your heart offered to the Lord.

So goodness and generosity are central to our story and our faith. We take on generosity and goodness because we have received so great a salvation from the Lord. And it is that great story of salvation in the Old Testament—the Exodus—to which we now turn to grow deeper in all aspects of our faith.

Please return with me to Exodus 14.5-14 in your pew Bible on pg. []. The Exodus story is, of course, one of the great stories in the whole Bible. Whenever we read the great stories of the Bible—in church, Bible study, or daily devotion—there's a risk we undertake. Because we're familiar with a story, we feel we understand it. We've seen all there is to see. G.K. Chesterton said, 'Familiarity breeds unfamiliarity and a lack of gratitude.'

The writer of Hebrews said, the Word of God is 'living and active,' which means the Spirit can reveal new truths from a story you've memorized. You may hear the Spirit's voice in the 20th reading of a story that you hadn't heard the previous nineteen readings. When we read the Bible, we come with humility *and* expectation. Growth in virtue requires humility. And you have to especially practice humility when you read a story that's familiar.

I'm preaching to myself this morning, too. I'm preaching on one of my favorite episodes in the Exodus story, yet I discovered a key insight that I've never seen before. Look at the end of verse 8. When Israel leaves Egypt after the Passover, she departs Egypt 'going out defiantly.'

The people of Israel ride a wave of victory after the Passover. Ten plagues swept across Egypt, the final plague, the death of the firstborn, was the worst to fall upon Egypt. Pharaoh had enough of Israel and sent them away

in haste. On their way out of the kingdom, Moses commanded Israel, ‘ask the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and clothing.’ So Israel plundered the Egyptians on the way out of the kingdom. Six hundred thousand men, add the women and children, leave that oppressive kingdom with new clothes, silver, and gold hanging around their necks. The underdog achieved the greatest upset in the ancient world. Onward to Canaan, the land promised to our fathers! It’s a victory march *and* a homecoming journey now. And we have the most spectacular escort through the wilderness—check out the pillar of cloud in the daytime; the pillar of fire by night is even better! In their victory, they left Egypt *defiantly*.

Defiantly they left Egypt until the pillars of cloud and fire led Israel to a seaside camp called Pi-hahiroth. Then the Lord says to Moses, “May I have a word? Set up camp here. Oh, and Pharaoh is just over the ridgeline there. Do not fear—I’ve led *both* of you here.”

Imagine the scene. Israel sets up camp at Pi-hahiroth. The pillar of fire blazes in the night sky. They’re soaring with confidence, marching through the wilderness with a tailwind at their backs. When they wake up the next morning, they look up and spot the pillar of cloud. They also see another familiar sight: chariots, horses, Egyptian soldiers, Pharaoh. *And they fear Pharaoh and his chariots more than the pillars of cloud and fire that led them out of Egypt.* /

Pi-hahiroth is the place of no escape, no exit. There’s a town in front of you—Baal-zephon—and the Red Sea behind you. Your enemy has cut you off on the northern route. The southern route isn’t an option because you don’t have a boat to traverse the sea. /

Pi-hahiroth is the place where your confidence quickly evaporates to fear. Verse 10: “When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, *and they feared greatly.*” Those gold and silver necklaces don’t gleam like they did on the night of Passover now. That righteous defiance has become quaking, doubting fear. /

Pi-hahiroth is the place where your faith is tested more than any other. It sounds noble and courageous to be a person of great faith. But becoming a person of great faith means setting up camp at Pi-hahiroth. Pi-hahiroth is the location where you discover you placed confidence in good circumstances more than the God who promised to be with you.

And yet, God has led you here! It couldn't be more obvious: pillars of cloud and fire ushered you here, stopping at Pi-hahiroth. And the Lord said, "Set up camp in this place." It is the will of God that you're here. Yes, your Enemy's bearing down on you. You hear the hoofbeats of the horses. They thunder in your chest. You see the chariots rampaging in the distance and you fear you're sure the end is near.

Pi-hahiroth is the place where you want to give in and be done with it all. You're tired of the Enemy's oppression, his harassment, and you say, "I wish I wouldn't have bought the false hope that I could be free. Life was more tolerable when I was a slave in Egypt. Verse 12: "I wish God would have just left me alone."

In the place of that fear and despair, the prophet of God says, "*Do not fear, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today.*" Ok, now we're talking. "The Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again." Yes, please. Now. "The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent." Wait, what? I feel the horses' hoofbeats in my chest, those chariots have reached full speed, and I'm supposed to be silent and wait for the Lord to fight for me?

When I'm trapped and see no exit, it sounds like a terrible plan to 'stand firm and be silent.' That story sounds ridiculous to me. When I'm backed into a corner, I want my story to be different. I want to fight my way out of this. I want to be the hero.

I want to be like Jason Bourne. Have you seen the *Bourne* movies? Jason Bourne is a fugitive spy suffering from amnesia, every spy agency in the world is after him, but he gets out of every life-threatening situation. When

Bourne comes into a room, he locates every possible exit. He fends off every attacker, even when he's ambushed. And he's ambushed *a lot*. After he thwarts all attackers, he escapes through the *only* available exit. He cheats death at least 9 times every movie. I want those skills. Because it looks awesome, and I'd be the hero.

But in the story of my faith, I can never be the hero. The Enemy is too powerful for me. I can't be my own savior. And even if I *did* defeat my enemy, the glory would go to my head.

Look at Exodus 14.3-4. Pharaoh sees Israel wandering in the wilderness. He sees a chance for revenge. He can pick them off like fish in a barrel. But the Lord allows Pharaoh and his army to catch up to Israel, because Pi-hahiroth is *not* the place of Israel's defeat. It's a trap the Lord set for his Enemy, to swallow him up forever. *The Lord leads his people to Pi-hahiroth to get glory over Pharaoh, all his host, all the Egyptians.* And when the Lord fights the battle, He will receive *permanent* glory over his Enemy.

Even though we are the Enemy's target, this isn't our battle. Pi-hahiroth is a place of two horizons. On one horizon, you see the Enemy with all his armaments. But on another horizon, you see the pillar of clouds and fire, high and lifted up, soaring above the Enemy that brings you fear.

And then this seaside camp; a place of no exit, no escape; a place that seemed like it was good land for 600,000 Israelite graves, has become a watery grave for the enemies of God. When you stand firm; when you choose silence and trust when you are most afraid, you will see a mighty sight. That pillar of cloud that led you to Pi-hahiroth will sweep across the Red Sea, barring the doors of the sea, so that you walk to another country on dry land.

If you want to grow in the virtue of faith, you must increase your exposure to those things that make you afraid. There is no other way. You can't face your greatest fears, your strongest spiritual enemies in your own strength, but there will be times in your life when the Spirit of the Lord says, "Your Enemy is near. Set up camp. I'm with you. Stand firm while I fight for

you.”

Perhaps it should not surprise us that our greatest spiritual guides—the Desert Fathers and Mothers—testify that acquiring the virtue of faith means tolerating the harassment of the Enemy. In other words, the more we follow Jesus the stronger we must become in enduring disturbances from the Enemy. When the Enemy disturbs your mind—stand firm and let the Lord fight for you. When the Enemy disturbs your body—stand firm and let the Lord fight for you. When the Enemy disturbs your soul—stand firm and let the Lord fight for you. With each new battle, your endurance will strengthen and *the Lord* will get glory over your enemies. This is how we acquire the virtue of faith.

Over the years, I’ve found strength from a little Spanish woman with a fire in her belly. St Teresa of Avila lived a difficult life in tumultuous times. Her mother died in her teenage years and her father was harsh and strict toward Teresa. In the midst of this suffering, Teresa found comfort in the life of prayer and the Lord revealed himself to Teresa in powerful ways.

She became a nun, but contracted malaria shortly after taking her vows. She suffered greatly through her illness, but testified that she could bear the illness with great composure and even joy.

She wanted to reform Spanish convents around the discipline of prayer, but faced great suspicion among the hierarchy. This was the era of the Spanish Inquisition. One priest criticized Teresa’s teaching on prayer saying, “a restless disobedient gadabout who has gone about teaching as though she were a professor.”

Teresa suffered mistreatment from many people in her life. When she offered her complaint to the Lord about this, she heard the Lord say, “That is how I always treat my friends.” To which Teresa replied, “No wonder you have so few of them!” Despite the life of hardships and trials she endured, St. Teresa lived with this conviction: ‘Pain is never permanent.’

Shortly after St Teresa died, the nuns in her care found a homemade bookmark. On that bookmark Teresa inscribed a prayer. I commend these

words to you as a way of standing firm, being silent, so the Lord will fight for you. St Teresa prayed:

Let nothing disturb thee,
Nothing affright thee;
All things are passing,
God never changeth!
Patient endurance attaineth to all things;
Who God possesseth
In nothing is wanting;
Alone God sufficeth¹.

When you live that prayer, in season and out season, we will be able to withstand the disturbances of our ancient Enemy. And even better, we will see the salvation of the Lord. And the Lord will use your faith to renew his good world. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Prayer of St. Teresa of Avila; St Teresa's Bookmark, *Celtic Daily Prayer*, 21.