

“Rest Assured” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey Sept. 21, 2008
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA)

TEXT: Exodus 14:21-31 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.’ Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.’ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

TEXT: Matt. 21:33-46 ‘Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes”?’ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

IT IS A GOOD DAY to hear stories about the providence of God; the power and care and promise of God; the absolute dependability of God. At the end of a week like we’ve seen, it is a good day to be reassured. And reassured we are, for both readings are vivid reminders that God, not the pharaoh; God, not the greedy land tenants; God, the passionate and compassionate, is the one ultimately in charge.

It seems that this week, we have entered the world of Calvinball. No not John Calvin, but cartoon-world Calvin and Hobbes. Calvin and his buddy Hobbes love to play Calvinball--a game with some kind of ball on some kind of a field with rules that are made up as you go along, rules that may or may not be communicated to the people you're playing with. Oh, and it's never played the same way twice. It's fast, it's dangerous, it's full of unexpected developments.

The games that are going on in the financial world look a lot like Calvinball. Countrywide, Lehman Brothers, AIG , Washington Mutual, Merrill Lynch -- corporations entrusted with the savings, retirement funds, and mortgages of millions of Americans, corporations who have been playing fast and loose with the rules that they helped to write -- suddenly find that the road to quick profits has run off of a cliff and like another cartoon character, Wily Coyote, they are spinning their legs, suspended in mid-air before dropping down into the gaping maw of the bankruptcy canyon below, all the while demanding that the government -- that is to say "us", taxpayers, the same investors and clients they've built on -- throw them a life line so that they can keep paying their executives multimillion-dollar bonuses.

The game feels like chaos, and the rules are changing as we speak. A headline in the Wall Street Journal read: "In Turmoil, Capitalism in U.S. Sets New Course." This past week marked a decisive turn in the evolution of American capitalism, a sea-change in the economic landscape as we know it.

Gone is the faith, shared by the nation's leadership with varying degrees of enthusiasm, that the best road to prosperity is to unleash financial markets to allocate capital, take risks, enjoy profits, absorb losses. Erased is the hope that markets correct themselves when they overshoot. Evaporated is the confidence in corporate officials. Also scrapped is the notion that government's role is to get out of the way, limiting itself to setting the rules of the game. The government is scrambling to understand what its game-plan should be -- "We hope this works!" isn't exactly comforting -- but it is definitely on the front line of the playing field.

In the world of our Scripture readings, the pharaohs have been defeated by the plagues and God has opened the sea. Now we face the wilderness. The wicked tenants have been replaced in the vineyards. Now; we take over in the vineyard as see if we can be more faithful. And not only is God an active participant, God invites us into partnership with God. And a partnership with God involves our relationship with the earth, our relationship with one another, our relationship with ourselves.

And what makes God's claim upon life the good news that it is? Nothing less than the mystery that the God who owns all is also the God who loves it all. In that mystery we experience the joy and freedom which come with the assurance that our lives belong totally to God, God who loves us completely. We discover that joy and wholeness of life consist not in control but in commitment to the always-larger and greater cause of a Kingdom. We sense the beauty of life lived by grace rather than grasp God's world is about healing and making whole that which has been broken. And we are part of that chain of events.

It seems to me that God is calling us first to be reassured, to remember that God has us covered. God is in charge, and that as God's agents, we are stewards of possibility. Without that reality, Calvinball is in play.

With it, the walls of water that hold back the seas of our fears, that resist the dark forces that threaten to overtake us, are the walls of Yahweh's grace. And within grace is the tenacity of faith and hope, which protect us and shelter us. The world tells us that our human institutions and systems set limits on what can be achieved; the legal system, the economy, our political system – they define what is possible. But today, God is telling us something different.

But after that, resting in that assurance, I think God is also telling us it is time for some moral outrage! Everyone has heard the famous phrase, attributed to James Carville, which supposedly won the presidential election of 1992 for Bill Clinton: "It's the economy, stupid!" But the issue is deeper than just the economy. I would now rephrase Carville and say, "It's the morality, sinner!"

In the accounts and interpretation of the week's events, a word is slowly entering the discussion and analysis — *greed*. It's an old concept, and one with deep moral roots. Even venerable establishment economists such as Robert Samuelson now say, "Greed and fear, which routinely govern financial markets, have seeded this global crisis ... short-term rewards blinded decision-makers to the long-term dangers." The financial collapse of Wall Street is the fiscal consequence of deregulation—the rule that markets are always good and government is always bad.

But it is also the moral consequence of greed, where private profit prevails over the concept of the common good. The American economy is often rooted in unbridled materialism, a culture that continues to extol greed, a false standard of values that puts short-term profits over societal health, and a distorted calculus that measures human worth by personal income instead of character, integrity, and generosity. And the benefits accruing to top CEOs and financial managers, especially as compared to the declining wages of average workers, has become one of the greatest moral travesties of our time.

The people on top of the American economy get rich whether they make good or bad decisions, while workers and consumers are the ones who suffer from all their bad ones. We are the ones who have played by the rules we knew: work hard and get paid fair wages; invest in a house, watch your equity grow, pass it on to the kids or sell it for retirement; put your money into a retirement account, don't take it out until you are 62 or 65 or 70 and live happily ever after. And we are the ones, it seems who are at the mercy of the pharaohs of the world, controlled by the wicked tenants of the world, and we are the ones left feeling helpless and angry and confused and afraid.

With our faith in God, plagues bring both pharaohs and Israelites to a new understanding of God's power and persistence and wicked tenants get replaced with faithful tenants and the fruit of the harvest is available to all. There is no requirement of dogma or doctrine. There is simply a call to trust and to act out of that trust. The chief priests and Pharisees realize that the parable is about them, but they can't manage to act differently. The only thing they knew was violence. Our readings condemn the greed, selfishness, and cheating that have been revealed in corporate behavior over decades now, and denounce their callous mistreatment of employees. But they do not let us off the hook. There is no easy rest in cheap grace here. If we move through fear and ego and blame, then we can live into the action that follows the faith.

We need wisdom from the economists and prudence from the business community and leadership from the government. We need compassion for those who

have been caught in the cross-fires of this crisis, and some strong safety nets to catch them. We need to be generous with our support. But we also need that moral outrage, in letters to the editor and to corporate heads and to congressional leaders, letters speaking on behalf of the common good and a morality of justice. And we need direct questions and candid answers from our political candidates about what course each of them would steer.

Our scriptures are not narratives *of faith* as much as narratives of people *on their way toward faith*. They remind us that we are all people who get scared, get greedy, show resistance, harbor resentments, plot against one another. Yet God remains faithful. It is always our egos, our self-centered sellout to the power of self actualization, that create fear and scarcity. The readings tell us that we will weather the current storms, our systems and our leaders will right themselves. In other news, New Orleans will eventually re-build, Galveston will recover, the fatal bombings of India, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Darfur will eventually end. Muslims will ignore the senior Saudi Arabian judge who gave permission to kill the owners of satellite TV channels which broadcast immoral programs, and the Chinese will continue to upgrade their quality controls so that no more infants are killed by tainted dairy products, After all, today is the United Nations World Peace Day with a call for a global ceasefire. And today Robert Mugawe has signed an historic power-sharing deal, and today the northern Rocky wolves are back on the protected species list, and today God's in the heavens and even though things are wrong with the world, God will turn it round right.

What these texts do more than anything else is to reassure us that God does not waver, even if we cannot foresee the outcomes. They give us permission to dream, to dream of a world where no one abuses their power, and, a world where abundant life is within reach of everyone .

May it be so.