

# Living in Providence

sermon digest

November 9, 2008

Exodus 16:2-15; John 6:30-35

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In 1636 a Puritan minister was banned from Boston because of his radical idea that religion should always be free. Forced to leave "civilization," he purchased land from native Americans in an area that we know as Rhode Island and established a city of refuge for dissenters who shared his radical ideas. He named the town Providence in gratitude for the *providence* of God that brought him to that place. Providence became an immediate city of refuge for people suffering from religious persecution. Many Baptists settled there, and the first Baptist church in America was founded by Roger Williams in Providence. The church is still vital, and the building erected in 1775 has become a historic national landmark. Providence is more than a place.

***Providence is a faith vision of God's purpose in the events of our lives.*** Williams was a Puritan Calvinist; he believed in the sovereignty of God over the events of history. While some Calvinists believe that God predetermined the events of history excluding human freedom and decision, Williams believed that God *provides* a way for redemption through the wilderness of circumstances. Williams believed that, even in exile God had provided a way for the founding of a colony grounded in religious liberty.

I like to play "what if" with history. Looking back at the path to the First Amendment, we, too, might conclude that the radical ideas of Roger Williams became the law of the land by the mysterious purpose of God in events we call "providence." But, *what if* Williams had been a rigid Calvinist reading in the powerful opposition of his church God's opposition to his wild ideas about religious liberty. *What if* Williams had concluded that God predetermined things to stay as they were? *What if* Williams gave up without resistance to church and state authority, without an effort to live out his dream?

*Providence* is more than a human response to events; providence is belief that God "provides" a way through the wilderness of history. Providence is the way people of faith respond to events over which they have no control and may appear to be terminal. We can view any moment in time as the total reality of life; or, we can view each event as a building block that contributes to a structure in the making. A single brick does not a building make, but in skilled hands independent and isolated bricks come together to form a structure. While one might conclude that a series of disconnected events leading to a radical turn in history is mere coincidence, people of faith have learned to see each event in life as a step that moves us toward the purpose of God in an architectural, redemptive whole that may seem impossible.

About twelve centuries before Christ, God called Moses to lead Israel out of Egyptian slavery to a land of freedom and promise. The record shows that the Exodus did not happen simply by the genius and skill of Moses or by the good will of an Egyptian Pharaoh. Even when a natural explanation was obvious, the whole event was an act of God. The fire of God's presence was in every bush. The escape from Egypt through the sea led to singing and dancing, but this was the beginning of a long journey. In the desert, the people needed water; God provided water and a lesson in trust. In the Sinai the people complained of hunger: "Better to die full of bread in Egypt than to starve in this wilderness." God provided bread from heaven in the morning and quails landed in their camp in the evening. Moses declared, "In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD"—a lesson in providence. When God calls people into the wilderness, God provides.

This was a lesson that would often be ignored but never lost from the memory of Israel. More than a millennium passed. Jesus was preaching in Galilee. Surrounded by a hungry mass of people, Jesus asked his disciples to find food. Andrew located a boy with a bag lunch of two fish and five small loaves of bread. Jesus took the loaves, broke and blessed them, gave them to the people, and fed the multitude. Later, inquisitors remembered the leadership of Moses, the bread from heaven in the wilderness, and challenged Jesus to match the miracle. Jesus reminded them that it was not Moses, "but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven." God provides. "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'" God provides.

***We are active participants in the providence of God.*** Nahum Sarna finds an explanation in nature for the events described in Exodus. A species of quail is known to migrate from Europe to central Africa and lands exhausted on the shores of the Mediterranean in the fall. A tamarisk bush found in the Sinai produces fruit. Insects eat the fruit and excrete an edible substance rich in carbohydrates that dries and falls to the ground. If not gathered quickly, it becomes food for ants. If one views providence as the purpose of God worked out in events, this does not explain away providence. If providence is natural, then God is continuing to rain down manna on those who have eyes to see.

I am reminded of William Barclay's theory of Jesus' miracle feeding of the multitude. The miracle is described in the Gospels as physical expansion of the loaves and fish into a banquet for 5,000 people. Barclay suggests that many of the multitude had brought food for the day. The example of generosity from the child

created a miracle of sharing and twelve baskets of leftovers. Is the creation of *koinonia* out of a disconnected mob any less of a miracle, any less an act of God? Like miracle, providence is the way we see the world. Providence has nothing to do with magic or the violation of nature. We are partners with God in working out God's purpose in our history. The Hebrew people were required to act on the generosity of God and to share in the daily harvest. Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," recognizing that every morsel of food is a gift of divine grace regardless of whether it is given by a parent, a neighbor, an alien, a friend, or falls as manna from heaven.

**Open the eyes of your faith.** Providence has everything to do with your perception of God in history. You either see God in the events of your life or you don't. Elizabeth Barrett Browning left a profound understanding of the burning bush in the calling of Moses:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

(from "Aurora Leigh")

Looking back over six centuries of Jewish history, the writer in Deuteronomy remembers the wilderness experience. The people received water from the rock and manna from heaven, but be warned: "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.'" (8:17) Jesus offered a similar concern that Moses would be viewed as the giver of bread from heaven.

Faith in a loving God is a lens through which we see God's hand in history. The message is for life both in the wilderness and the Promised Land. In good times, in the land of Promise, open your eyes to the gift of God behind your accomplishments in life, be grateful for the steadfast love of God, and open your heart to your neighbor who continues to wander in the desert. In bad times, see through the darkness of the wilderness the light of God's promise. The providence of God is consistent in good times and in bad. Some see and others don't. Some perceive God beyond and behind every event. Others cannot see beyond the moment.

Religious liberty in this nation was both an act of providence and the determined commitment of a man named Roger Williams to a vision of hope. We are the heirs of promise, the beneficiaries of liberty through a man and a place—Providence. We are also the heirs of promise, the beneficiaries of a vision five years ago that we now call Grace Covenant Church. For awhile it seemed that we had arrived in the Land of Promise. God had blessed us, and it seemed that we could live out of the reservoir of God's grace forever. We have celebrated our hope and sung the promise, but the manna of God is always "daily bread." We have found what the Hebrew children discovered fourteen centuries ago. A wilderness always stands between a vision of hope and a place called Providence, between promise and fulfillment. Like the wandering Jews, we have lost brothers and sisters along the way to death. We have suddenly awakened to the harsh challenge of a global economic crisis that has undercut family income and threatened security for the future. As we turn the page on our fifth year, we need to ask again, is Grace Covenant Church an act of God's providence in our lives? Can we see the hand of God behind the events of the past five years? What must I do to participate in God's providence for the future?