

September 14, 2003

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



Moses Was a Basket Case

Exodus 2:1-10; 4:10-13

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious God, may these words truly by your grace be your Living Word to us. Pour through me the gift of preaching, that these words might touch every one of us at our point of need. We know they will, O God, for we pray with anticipation in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen.

This simple poem, "The Weaver", I believe summarizes this sermon:

My life is but a weaving between the Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors He worketh steadily.
Oft time he weaveth sorrow, but I in foolish pride,
Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside.
Not til the loom is silent, and the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why
The dark threads are as needful, in the weaver's skillful
hand,
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has
planned.

Dr. Craig Barnes is a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary – he preached this summer at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Craig tells a delightful story about going into a gas station and saying to the attendant, "Hey, how are you doing?" The attendant responded, "Lousy!" Then the following week, he went back and again asked, "Hey, how you doing?" Again the attendant said, "Lousy!" Every week Craig went to that gas station for four months, and asked the attendant that same question, and every week he got the same reply – "Lousy!" Then one day Craig went in and asked his regular question, "How you doing?" and the guy responded, "Great!" Craig was surprised and said, "Oh, so things are improving?" "Nah", the guy said, "I just lowered my expectations." That is a parable of our age.

A lot of people in this world have just lowered their expectations with an attitude of: nothing new is going to happen to me, no change is going to happen in my life. Sometimes people get so discouraged they even wonder

"....at the communion table this morning we can meet and experience the living God and God's presence in our lives – not only today in this sanctuary, but in every second of our lives. Every second."

if they're going to experience the presence of God. George Barna is a futurologist and a religious researcher much like George Gallup at Princeton, New Jersey. George Barna's research shows that on an average Sunday morning in the United States of America between 70-75 million people are worshipping in Christian churches. But there are two discouraging parts of this research: Of that 75 million, less than 1/3 say they regularly experience God's presence; and what shocked me even more is that 1/3, 27 million people, said that they have never in their whole life experienced the presence of God!

So I wish I could talk to each one of you this morning and ask you honestly, "What did you expect to happen to you when you came into this sanctuary today? Did you expect to experience the presence of God? Did you expect really to experience the presence of the living Lord God through Jesus Christ? Or did you just lower your expectations and think that nothing is going to happen in my life?" The reality is that at the communion table this morning we can meet and experience the living God and God's presence in our lives – not only today in this sanctuary, but in every second of our lives. Every second.

This is the lesson we learn from Moses as he started to experience God's presence in his life. I am glad that the Bible is so honest and reveals Moses to be the ordinary, struggling person that he was. You might expect Moses to be very strong, a saint. But let's face it, Moses was a basket case. The only thing strong about Moses was that he was strong-willed. God said, "Moses, I want

you to lead the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt.” (God chose Moses as the one specifically equipped for the task.) But as soon as God told him that, in the burning bush, Moses began looking for excuses, “Oh no, I’m not eloquent enough. It’s not the right time in my life. I’m not really able to do this, God.” You can read it all in Exodus 2:15.

God responded to Moses, “I want you to do this. What are your objections?” And Moses said, “Well, God, people are going to say to me, ‘Who is this God who wants to lead the people out of captivity. What is His name?’” And God said, “My name is Yahweh, I am who I am.” (Or more literally in Hebrew, I will be who I will be.) God was telling Moses, “I’m going to be with you. I’m going to reveal myself, my presence, to you. I’m going to be with you.”

But Moses insisted, “Oh God, couldn’t you choose somebody else?” I know there’s a nominating committee. Couldn’t You just nominate somebody else – I’m not the one. I’ve got to decline the nomination.” “Moses,” God said, “look at that shepherd’s staff in your hand – I’m going to take that rod and I’m going to teach you some lessons. I can take that rod and turn it into a snake. With it I can change a river into blood. What I mean, Moses, is that rod is very powerful! I’m going to use that rod to teach the people signs and wonders so they will believe that you are representing Me.” “Oh God, please come up with somebody else,” Moses pleaded, “There’s got to be another person who can do it. I’m just not the one.”

Does this sound familiar to anyone? Do any of you do this with God and say, “Oh God, I’m not the one. I’m not eloquent enough.” But God was patient with Moses and said, “Moses, your brother Aaron is eloquent. I will give you the words I want you to say. You whisper them in his ear and he’ll speak them.” Even after all of this, Moses said, “God, wouldn’t it be easier just to choose someone else?” Moses was a basket case, and a strong-willed basket case, at that!

Hope, our granddaughter, is two years old. She is a beautiful and very special little girl. In fact she may be the most beautiful little girl in the world. (Now don’t anyone disagree with me!) She was at dinner this summer with Suzanne and me, Ryan and Holly, her two brothers and a table full of relatives and family – and nothing was right for Hope. I hate to say it, but she turned into a basket case – a beautiful basket case, but a basket case nevertheless. She was crying and she was screaming. She didn’t want this, she didn’t want that. It was no, no, no, no. We all tried to figure out how to handle it, but our daughter-in-law, Holly, who is phenomenal with children saved the day. Anyone who can handle three children under the age of four while her

husband is away at sea for six months has my vote of admiration! She just looked over at Hope and said in a stern, strong, but calm, voice, “Hope Lauren Tewell” – that got her attention – “Hope Lauren Tewell, fold your hands and get control.” Here’s the amazing thing. Hope did it. She folded her little hands and she got control. My brother-in-law, who is an optometrist, said he’s going to try that with his patients. At home when I get a little testy now, sometimes Suzanne says, “Tom, fold your hands and get control.”

Moses needed to hear that line himself, because he was a basket case. “God, I can’t do it, I’m not eloquent. God, I’m not the one, choose someone else.” Then all of a sudden, in a sense, God said to Moses, “Who do you think you are to be talking back? I’m the Lord God. I am Yahweh. I am who I am. Who do you think you are Moses? Fold your hands and remember I’m in control. Moses, you are a basket case, but remember you were born and placed in a basket of grace. Remember Moses, you might never have been born if pharaoh had his way. Even when you were born, pharaoh could have killed you as he wanted to do. Who do you think put you in that basket in the bulrushes, and guided you over to where pharaoh’s daughter could find you? Who do you think was working all that out? And Moses, who do you think was at work when pharaoh’s daughter was so touched when she held you and asked ‘what are we going to do with this baby?’ And who do you think had your sister Miriam there on the spot to tell pharaoh’s daughter ‘I can get a woman of the Hebrews to raise the child for you.’ Moses, who do you think was working all this out?

“And Moses, I was there when you killed that Egyptian, and you buried him in the sand and thought nobody knew about it. Who do you think was working in your life and led you to Midian and took you to the home of Jethro and made you fall in love with his daughter and marry her? Who do you think gave you your family, wife and in-laws? Who do you think did that? Who do you think gave you the job as a shepherd? Who do you think spoke to you from the burning bush? Who do you think was the basket of grace guiding your whole life? Moses, don’t you realize I’ve been with you through all of this? I’ve been enveloping you Moses in a basket of grace. So, who do you think you are to talk back to me?”

Have any of us ever shaken our puny fist at God? Remember God is the weaver, the master weaver. God is weaving the threads of our life together just as in the poem at the beginning of this sermon. Oh, I know, sometimes we see the underside and things look chaotic and confusing, but God can turn it around and we can see it all from God’s perspective, and we say, “Aha, so there IS a plan, there IS a design. God is weaving things

together.” Be very sure. God can take the silver and gold and dark – whatever color of thread; things people meant in your life for evil and things people meant for good. God can take mistakes of the past and successes and weave them all together into a glorious tapestry. And when we come to communion our lives can be changed by the presence of God.

This summer I had an opportunity, as I have every summer, to study some theology. I was reading the works of John Calvin, and in *The Institutes*, I found myself re-learning some familiar truths. I had read a lot of this before, years and years ago, but I was learning again that theologians down through history have always debated about this communion table and what happens here. Some of you may have had the experience of being in Lutheran, or Roman Catholic churches and see how they view the Eucharist. Maybe you have debated what happens here – is it consubstantiation, is it transubstantiation, do the elements actually, literally, physically become the body and blood of Jesus Christ, or are they simply symbols for the body and blood of Jesus Christ? Scholars have debated this down through Church history. Theologians have struggled with it for many years. But as I studied John Calvin, I read this tucked away there in *The Institutes*: “What changes at the table is not the elements. It’s the people. It’s the communicants. We are the ones who change.” Calvin said, “You experience the presence of God, but the change that takes place is not that the elements magically become the body and blood of Christ. It’s that we change, we are different. We come to the table with our sins and we hand them to God. In return, God gives us righteousness.”

Or said more simply, we come to the table as a basket case, we hand our anxieties to God and God wraps us in a basket of grace.

Be very sure this includes even those things in our world that people mean for evil – like war, like depravity, like prejudice. I don’t know how God does it. God doesn’t want those things and doesn’t cause those things, but God can weave it together in a wondrous way beyond our understanding and God can make us whole.

I experienced it myself this summer. As you know our son, Ryan, had been away for almost six months in the Persian Gulf as a helicopter pilot in the United States Navy. You’ve heard me say how grateful we were when he came home in June, safe and sound. But Suzanne and I had not really talked to Ryan, so we wondered how he was really doing. If you have a friend, parent, sibling, child, spouse or loved one who has been away, even though they say in letters, emails or phone calls that they are OK, until you look them in the eye, sit with them, watch them and are actually with them, you

don’t really know if it’s true. This summer I took a long jog and a long walk with Ryan and we looked each other in the eye. I observed him with his wife and his children and family members. And I was blown away!

I hadn’t realized the depth of our son’s faith. I knew he was a Christian, I knew he believed in Jesus Christ, but I never realized the spiritual resources of our son. I said, “Ryan, how was it out there?” “Well, Dad,” he said, “It’s unnerving to think that every time you go up in a helicopter you might not come back. And I had to plan every day that I might not make it back to the base. So what I did was to make sure that I had said my prayers. I made sure I was right with Holly and with the kids and with you, Mom and Toby. I made sure all my relationships were in order every day because I knew I might not come back. And I wrote letters in case I didn’t come back.” I didn’t know about this. He said, “Each one of you would have a letter so you would know that I was okay with God when I died and went to heaven. But Dad, even though I lived with that and even though I had a loaded gun in the cockpit with me every day I flew – and even though I was in danger and there were times I was afraid, I was always surrounded with a kind of a peace. I just felt in the marrow of my bones that I was going to be okay. You and Mom told me there were many people praying for me at Fifth Avenue and around the world.”

I know that many of you prayed for Ryan regularly. Jan Ammon was Ryan’s junior high advisor – she prayed for him every single day. And that touched his heart and gave him peace. He had spiritual resources to draw on that he didn’t even fully know that he had. When I saw him this summer I realized that Ryan is now more whole, more joyful, more stable, more faithful than I’ve ever known him to be. And he is saying that he and Holly have an opportunity to have a ministry to people who have kids or spouses who are away from them, because they understand so much more about what they are going through. This is all so very interesting to me, who would never, ever have wanted our son to be in a war. And you must know that there were times when I was a basket case while he was away.

But I must tell you that Ryan got an inner peace, a peace that passes all understanding. And what he’s doing today is living every day of his life as if it were his last. The tapestry of his life is forever changed. Out of the threads of war, through that monstrosity, our son became deeper in his faith. So don’t ever think that God is abandoning you. Don’t ever think that a thing is so evil that God cannot bring something good out of it. Don’t ever think that anything is the last word on today, except Jesus Christ. God is the master weaver and has the ability to weave the tapestry of your life, the silver and gold and dark threads. God weaves them all togeth-

er for good.

Will you come to this table and experience the presence of God that will give you peace? If you do, you will discover that these words are absolutely true. Listen to them again.

My life is but a weaving between the Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors He worketh steadily.
Oft time he weaveth sorrow, but I in foolish pride,
Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside.
Not til the loom is silent, and the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why
The dark threads are as needful, in the weaver's skillful
hand,
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has
planned.

Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on cassette tape and CDs.

**FIFTH AVENUE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Seven West 55th St., NYC 10019

212.247.0490 . www.fapc.org

REV. DR. THOMAS K. TEWELL

SENIOR PASTOR

Dial-A-Prayer 212.246.4200 . Thought Line 212.246.4204

Copyright © 2003, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church
All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.