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**What's Coming... - Exodus 5**

Have you wondered what God is up to? Been pushed into a corner where there seems to be no room for both you and God, so overwhelmed by adversity or circumstances or busy-ness that there hasn't been any place or time for God in any of it?

Surely that's the way these poor people of Exodus felt – literally, slaves to their work, beaten if they take a breath, and all their two leaders do is make things worse.

“Well, if they've got time to worry about worship, then they've got too much time on their hands!”

Time keeps getting chopped up into smaller and smaller bits, as this or that demand takes away any chance to consider anything but what's in front of their face right now, like Pharaoh's plan – our lives have way too much mud, and not enough straw, and no time to rest.

We want life to have meaning, It does, you know; given to us by God, in Jesus Christ, but who has time to think about *that* kind of thing?

And how *on earth* can we know that what we're doing actually accomplishes that? Key words: "on earth" and "know."

How did the Israelites *know* they were doing the right thing? Who elected Moses and Aaron anyway? And do they really know what they're doing? It sure seems that *I'm* paying the price for their hob-knobbing with Pharaoh...

Were they waiting for God to "show up"? No, God was there – in and with their suffering – building his case.

What did you hear in this story? Forget for a moment that it's thousands of years old...it could have been fifty years ago, it could be now. What did you hear? Perhaps that work is more important than God; spending time in worship is wasted; people who are seeking time with God are just looking for an excuse to get out of work

It's still an issue to take time for worship, for God. But while it was this aspect of Exodus 5 that first got my attention, this week the passage takes on new meaning: what is God doing?

An eight-year-old boy makes a poster for a school project his class did to take some of the toxic fear and horror out of the massacre at Newtown; it can be enormously helpful to pull out ones' fears and look at them and then say something about them, and that's what Martin did.

His poster was simple; no picture, just four words, printed in eight-year-old writing, up in the left-hand corner since kids have a hard time judging how much space they need. The four words he wrote were: “No more hurting people.” Martin, who wrote those four words, was the little boy killed by the bombs in Boston Monday.

When I saw the picture of Martin proudly holding up his work on TV, I immediately thought of another story: the story of the teachers who led their students out of the Newtown school by having them put a hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them, and then telling them to close their eyes, and keep them shut, while the teacher took the first child’s hand and walked them to safety.

Eben Alexander, the neurosurgeon who wrote “Proof of Heaven,” about his own experience of death, says that his guide through the early stages of his journey after his brain stopped working told him three things: “You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing that you can do wrong.”

So here were these kids, putting their trust in their teacher, in their teacher’s love for them (although none of them probably thought of it that way) past the bodies of their friends, neighbors, and schoolmates. They were loved. There was nothing for them to fear. There was nothing that they could do wrong; but they still had to – still have to – deal with the enormity of loss, the depth of evil, the pain of experience.

They will, somehow; some better than others, some in self-destructive ways, others making the world a better place for their living in it.

And here were the people of Israel. Their God, whom they seem to have mostly lost track of in the years after their ancestors were saved from famine by coming to Egypt has spoken to Moses and Aaron, who are Hebrews like them, and God told Moses and Aaron that it is time for the people of Israel to leave Egypt and get back to the business of being a blessing to the world, their original calling.

Moses and Aaron, they just do what God tells them to do, which is ask Egypt's Pharaoh to let the Hebrews take a few days off to go into the desert and worship God – get reacquainted. They ask, you know the answer, and the people who pay the price for the asking are the people of Israel, who now have to work even harder for Moses' and Aaron's privilege of making Pharaoh angry.

So, to sum up: God says, do this. Moses and Aaron do it; and the people suffer for it. Really suffer for it. Is it any wonder at all why the supervisors – who not only have to deal with the workers, but get beaten by their Egyptian masters – are wondering what is going on? What are Moses and Aaron up to? Is it surprising that Moses and Aaron go back to God and ask, “What are you trying to do to us?” Today, you can be sure there'd be conspiracy theories that Moses and Aaron are really

Egyptian operatives, out to give Egypt an excuse to kill them all – that’s even in the story itself.

Perhaps you’re one of those people who’ve never been sick a day in your life. Perhaps tragedy has happened all around you, but you’ve managed to remain untouched. If life were a rainstorm, you’d walk through it bone-dry. If so, then none of this will make sense to you.

But for the rest of us, who’ve had to ask at some dark point, “Why me?” – or even more desperately, “Why me, God?” – this story tells our story. We’re just doing what you seem to want us to do, Lord – pray, come to church, read the Bible – well, at least sometimes; and what do we get out of it? More tragedy? What kind of a deal is that?

My brother Doug, who died before I was born, got it in his head to wash the family cat. So every time he could catch it, he dumped it in a bucket of water. He did it so often, that eventually the cat stopped cleaning itself. What’s the use? That kid’s gonna dunk me again anyway... Some people’s relationship with God is like that.

But the people of Israel keep on listening to Moses and Aaron, and Moses and Aaron keep listening to God – even though things keep getting worse. Why do they trust? It’s like that old routine: “Doctor, it hurts whenever I do this.” “Well, don’t do that!”

For some, human tragedies like the ones we’ve suffered as a nation over the past couple of years, like Newtown, like Boston, like Aurora; or

a few more, like Columbine, or Oklahoma City, or 9/11, have pushed them into that corner I mentioned at the beginning, where there's not enough room for them AND God, made them ask "Why, God?", and then, when things don't get better, have just reached the understandable conclusion that if there is a God, God doesn't care about me, and written God off.

And then there are those who, like the Israelites, who just keep on going. They may still ask why, but in the midst of all the garbage, they hear a distant sound, a voice that isn't really speaking, but still communicates a message: "You are loved, cherished, deeply. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing that you can do wrong," and put their heads down and keep on going through the muck that is trying so hard to overwhelm them.

It would, perhaps, be easier to keep faith and follow if there weren't so many words, so much news, so many different voices. But that's not what God handed us when he served up our helping of life. Instead, God keeps pulling us along, asking us to trust him, take his hand like the teachers in Newtown, follow the path he's laid for us, follow the way he showed us in Jesus, a path, by the way, that led to salvation only through suffering.

And so, like frightened schoolchildren, our Teacher asks us to put our hands on the person ahead of us, our classmates, and walk through

the carnage into God's loving arms. We could be anxious; we could be terrified. But we don't have to be, because what's coming after we get through is safe, and peaceful, and love.