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“Faithful Questions Lead to Remarkable Reversals”

A sermon by Lee Hinson-Hasty

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Exodus 32:1-14

What an honor it is to be here again at First Presbyterian Church in Durham, especially in this your centennial year! I am a longtime fan of this church and those connected to it including, of course, your pastor Mindy Douglas. Mindy is my favorite Montreat Small Group Leader ever and a leader in the PCUSA nationally especially in the area of leadership and theological education. One of your former pastors, Joe Harvard, is also a friend both of mine and Presbyterian Seminaries as well as the Theological Education Fund Seminary Support Network. In my lexicon, Paul Baldasare defines Presbyterian ruling elder. Not only is he a spiritual leader, he is a leader with a beautiful spirit. I worked with Paul at St. Andrews Presbyterian University where he serves now as President. I actually graduated from Wake Forest University... but on the day after a lucky Demon Deacon win here in Durham, I'm going to stick with way your newsletter identified me as a St. Andrews alum! Homer Ashby and Robert Brawley, retired full time faculty of McCormick Theological Seminary are both legendary. I've been learning that First Presbyterian is full of people like those I have mentioned and so I look forward to getting to know you even better in these days and hopefully in the years to come. Leadership with spirit and vision seems to be in the DNA of this congregation when I consider the snapshot of your history I know. No matter what the cause, women's ordination in 1954, or racial integration in 1955, you were on the leading edge. You have provided trustees, often board chairs, for Presbyterian seminaries and colleges, hospitals, and numerous social service agencies.

Whether the issue is affordable housing, global mission, education, health care, higher morally grounded government, starting new churches you and yours have been ready to lead and support, or supporting new ministers prepared and preparing at Presbyterian Seminaries (The last of which I am especially grateful through your gifts to the Theological Education Fund). There are so many reasons to love this church. It makes me wonder, “What will you do next that echoes your holy pilgrimage, that honors God and God’s intentions yet again for you and God’s beloved world? What will you do next? Where will you go?”

Israel was on a holy pilgrimage too, one from Egypt to the promised land, when some interesting questions arose as they were trying to figure out what to do next. Would you pray with me as we turn to God’s story told in scripture in the book of Exodus, chapter 32, the first fourteen verses?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God of reconciliation and remarkable reversals. Amen.

As we all were getting ready to come to church this morning, maybe sipping juice and coffee, we crossed the fifteen-year mark of the dreaded events of September 11th 2001. I suspect you remember where you were when you heard this news first. Fifteen years ago at about 8:30 AM, Elizabeth, my wife, and I had just dropped off our seventeen-month old son, Garrison, at daycare and were on our way to St. Andrews Presbyterian College where she had just began teaching her first semester and I had started to serve as the Director of Church Relations. I’m not sure if Paul Baldasare came to me or I went to Paul, but we knew we needed to do something. In the midst of a crisis, is when you find out if you are ready to recognize and ask the right questions.

In January of 2012 I visited the 9/11 memorial alongside the cohort of Presbyterian seminary presidents, board chairs and their spouses. Maybe you have been there too? At that time the memorial had only recently opened and

I thought I was prepared to see the two gaping holes where the towers once stood, now inward flowing fountains and pools below.

The drastic contrast with the high rise cityscape took my breath away. As we all moved closer to the two city-block sized square holes, we all became silent... not just us but the thousands of others filing into the memorial park. Many of us paused as we passed the one tree that miraculously survived the catastrophe. In the table-like black-granite railing around the two fountains are etched the names of over three-thousand who died as a result of the tragic attack. More than anything else that day, I remember running my fingers over those names... as many of them as I could touch. I gave thanks for them one by one and noticed others seemingly doing the same. At one point I looked up and surveyed the nearby St. Paul's Episcopal Chapel that my friend, Dr. Courtney Cowart, was serving as a Foundation officer in 2001. She had convened a meeting next door to the Chapel on September 11th that included the soon to be named archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Courtney remembers the church grounds and nearby streets blanketed first by white papers. Her cohort was miraculously unharmed and the same was true for St. Paul's Chapel. I remembered her calling it "the little chapel that stood" right in the middle of multiple other area buildings burning and collapsing as ancillary damage from the attack on the two towers.¹

In that moment, on the memorial plaza, Courtney's name joined the others engraved at my fingertips.

Although it is a different kind of list, a list of names is how the book of Exodus begins. In fact, the Jewish title of the book is directly from the Hebrew, *ella semot*, meaning "These are the names." It goes on to name the households that came from Egypt: Jacob's, Reuben's, Simeon's, Levi's, Judah's, Issachar's, Zebulun's Benjamin's, Dan's, and Naphtali's. After naming the households, Exodus Chapter one foreshadows the end of the story... the story before the

¹ For a full account of what happened that day and in the recovery effort Courtney Cowart's book *American Awakenings*. Not only did she direct the 9-11 recovery effort for Episcopalians, but also their work following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

oppression in Egypt and escape is described. It says, those households die, but they were fertile and multiplied, filling the whole land with a new population.

“The Shaping of Holy Lives” is the film Courtney’s group had gathered to make that day that foreshadowed their actual activity that day. They were reshaped that day by events that were broadcast over and over and over again across the world. They, in turn, reshaped their next faithful steps, Courtney in particular. The new job title would not come for weeks, but that day, she became the Co-Founder and Chief of Staff for St. Paul’s Chapel 9-11 Recovery. Over the next ten months, she established an operation of 5,000 volunteers and 15,000 recovery workers. Not only did she recruit and supervise staff and create operational procedures, she used her skills as a theological scholar to study and document the ministry they were doing as a new paradigm of congregational leadership. At St. Paul’s she found leadership includes four essentials for human thriving: safety, dignity, relationship and resilience. They developed spiritual practices that her and her colleagues did over and over again that created the conditions for safety, dignity, relationship, and resilience for which everyone was yearning.

“The architecture of the community (they) fostered,” she said, “became one of mutual storytelling, testimony and holy listening. When you came to serve at St. Paul’s, a central part of what you did was to listen to the stories of workers who came in to thaw after shifts digging through rubble by hand for human remains. We listened to one another talk about why we love what we love, why we care about what we care about, why we do what we do. (W)e listened 24/7. If you entered the chapel at 3 a.m., you would see thousands of people sitting in the pews in pairs whispering to each other in hushed voices in the candlelight. We listened as if nothing else in the world mattered but this person, this life, this sacred text from life being shared. (We found) just this one practice regenerated daily all four of the nutrients needed for human thriving: safety, dignity, relationship and resilience.”

Four months before, 9-11, Courtney graduated from General Theological Seminary in NYC with her doctorate in **Ascetical** theology; the study of spiritual teachings found in Scripture and ancient Church History that help the faithful to more perfectly follow Christ.

Good scholars, scholars well-prepared, know how to ask the right questions. They are trained and ready recognize core questions, and those questions drive their research and writing. Finding those central questions is an art as well as a science. My father in law, Glenn Hinson, also a church historian as well as a new testament scholar, has written over thirty books and hundreds of scholarly articles. When I asked him where got all the ideas for his writing, he quickly responded. "They all started with questions from students." Now retired from teaching formally, Glenn continues to teach and learn with classes in congregations and retreat centers. I'm sure he didn't research and write about **every** student question, but he knew when he heard an important question.

Good questions, faithful questions, when we are prepared and ready, we know them. They become undeniable. We prepare ourselves as best we know how, and then those questions demand a response. Glenn's former students tell him how he opened new worlds to them, how their lives and those of they lead were changed because of his scholarship and teaching. He's humble about that, like most teachers are. He'd say that he just helped prepare them recognize faithful questions... helped them be ready when the theological dilemma found them. As a teacher, he taught them about church history and scripture as a wellspring of resources to help them address whatever they faced. The methodologies, the rhythms of spiritual disciplines, and the network of the body of Christ that surrounded them in time and space including the present. I'd say the same is true for my friend, Courtney. None of us imagined the attack that happened on 9-11-2001 and she certainly didn't. God did not will it or desire it, but Courtney was prepared well by her theological education and church community to recognize how to frame the nearly unspeakable yet faithful questions that found her that day, fifteen years ago today. How do we create space for safety, dignity, relationship, and

resilience? She knew how. She knew from the scriptural account and church history that her theological studies taught her: Storytelling and holy listening. She'd written about it and now she and thousands of others practiced it day in and day out, around the clock for months, there in that symbol of hope, safety, dignity, relationship, and resilience, the little chapel that stood, St. Paul's. The ministry they created, reversed radically the dominant narrative of death all around them.

I wonder what faithful questions you are recognizing today? I wonder what resources from scripture and church practice you can draw upon to address those questions? I wonder what reversals are just around the corner? I say, faithful questions, because **there are** bad questions. My church school class in Louisville has been reading Krista Tippett's new book, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*. "It's **not** true," she says, "what they taught us in school; there **is** such a thing as a bad question."² She describes bad questions as ones intended to "corner, incite, or entertain." They are "often an assumption masked as an inquiry and looking for a fight." Tippett is the host of the award winning public radio show, *On Being*. A graduate of Yale Divinity School, Tippet's ministry call is seemingly to provide faithful, undeniable interview questions to people of substance. There are, she says, also simplistic questions that only generate simplistic answers. Instead, she seeks to ask "generous questions, questions that "invite honesty, dignity, and revelation. There is," she says, "something redemptive and life-giving about asking a better question." Generous questions, as she calls them, or I will say faithful questions, questions that cut to our core, are, as she says, a "social art and civic tools." They are questions we hold on to and live into. They are questions like "Are we not of interest to each other?"³ Or "What did you love most when you were a child?" They are questions that "invite searching- not on who is right and who is wrong and the arguments on every side; not on whether we can agree' but on what is at stake in human terms for us all." Generous, faithful questions, animate and provide a learning opportunity and lead to life-giving ways... even in the midst of certain

² Tippett, Krista, *Becoming Wise* (Penguin Press, New York, 2016) 29. *Emphasis added*.

³ Tippet, Krista, *Becoming Wise*, p. 30.

destruction and even death. **The resulting reversal radically changes the trajectory of the conversation, the life, and the direction going forward and sometimes for generations.**

That's the kind of reversal that happens in our scripture reading today from Exodus. I shared with you the Hebrew name for this book, *ella semot*, "these are the names." Our English name for this second book of the Torah, Exodus, is derived from the Latin Septuagint's title that literally means "Going forth from Egypt." Our reading describes a critical moment of decision for the Hebrew people. They have "Gone forth," having escaped Pharaoh's territory and power and are trying to get used to living in the realm of the Holy One. They have yet to realize God could not be contained in a country nor by any other earthly boundaries.

As a large and ethnically diverse group escapees in the desert, the Hebrew people were forging themselves into a new community. They had questions like: (1) Now that we are on our own, how are we supposed to live our lives together as a people? (2) Without someone like pharaoh nearby, whom do we serve?

The story in Chapter 32 I read today is iconic, literally, iconic. Let's "make us a god who can lead us." Some interpreters want to put the blame on Aaron, others the people. Truthfully, everyone is implicated: The Hebrew men presumably make the demand, the women and children give up their gold jewelry, Aaron melts down the gold and shapes the calf, and all of the above dance at the festival and bow down to this idol they have created together.

This is far from a private event and is learned quickly by Moses and God on the Mountain. The bull calf was a common Egyptian idol that Israel must have noted when enslaved by Pharaoh.

God's first response is **far** from merciful. "Let my fury burn and devour them." **Moses then asks some really generous and faithful questions to God: Questions that cannot be denied, that literally animate the conversation:**

“LORD, **why** does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? **Why** should the Egyptians say, ‘He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth’?”

Moses even offers a faithful possible answer for God to his good questions: “Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people. ¹³**Remember** Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, ‘I’ll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I’ve promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.’”

What happens next, besides the resurrection of Christ Jesus, may be the greatest and most remarkable reversal in Scripture. Some scholars say, it rivals the that of the entire Exodus story itself. God does remember the larger story of redemption... starting with the names of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. All of that in one verse, verse fourteen: “Then the LORD changed the Lord’s mind about the terrible things the Lord said would be done to the people Israel.”

God did turn. God did reverse directions. Or you might say, Moses’ faithful questions in the midst of a crisis, led to a radical reversal in the story of Israel... one that did finally lead to the promised land and generations later, a messiah who died and radically reversed human history. Moses’ questions could not be denied, indeed they were his intercessions, reminding God of God’s true self.

Have you been asking lots of questions of yourself, the world, and even God lately? I know I have. Every news cycle seems to provide at least one new pertinent and question disturbing rhetoric or activities of other human beings... other children of God. “When will political parties learn to speak civilly to one another? Can we create space for a moral agenda in civic life? Who will heal the tragic losses from terrorist activities? How can the violence be stopped in Syria? Where will Brexit lead the European Union and the

world? How can we best address exploding educational debt? What will reconcile the loss of Black Lives? Can the United States provide respectable affordable housing for all? What I am not sure of, is exactly how to frame the questions where I need to lean into the most... the ones I am best prepared to ask and answer. How about you?

Are you prepared to recognize and frame any faithful questions for and with those in the midst of crisis? What questions for you and your community are undeniable, faithful, and generous?

My father-in-law's most recently published book is his memoir. In a way, it is sort of his *final record of the key questions he faced in life*, what made him as a person of faith, minister of the gospel, professor, writer, and disciple.

Whether we like it or not, we are each writing on our own life memoirs for one another: for our families, friends, communities and world. History is being made in the small ways as we seek to name and address questions, some good, some bad, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not. My prayer today is that you and I are recognizing and even naming faithful and generous questions, questions without simple explanations; questions that matter **and finding ways to answer them that echo what we have learned as people of faith in the scriptural story and the stories of the faithful in every generation.**

As our scripture lesson makes clear today, God is not scared of good questions. So what are the faithful questions you cannot deny today?

*The Rev. Dr. Lee Hinson-Hasty was ordained in 1995 and served as campus minister and pastor in Virginia and as director of church relations at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in North Carolina prior to his current appointment. He actively engages in dialogue, study, and initiatives that foster relationships and leadership development in the church and academy. The author of numerous published essays and articles, Hinson-Hasty also writes the blog commentary, *A More Expansive View: Encounters with Presbyterians and our Seminaries*, which can be found at: <http://www.pcusa.org/blogs/seminaries/>. He earned his BA in History from Wake Forest University, a M.Div. from Louisville Seminary, and the Doctor of Ministry degree from McCormick Theological Seminary, where his scholarship focused on leadership in a multicultural world.*

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