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In the World for Ministry

Exodus 17:6

This is not a good time to be talking about a pledge campaign. The decision to mail pledge cards to the congregation at the end of September was made last May. At that time we had no idea that in the final week of September our nation would be caught in the grips of one of the worst credit crises in our history. We could not have imagined that the news this weekend would be dominated by emergency negotiations in Congress to pass the largest bail out of financial institutions in U. S. history.

This national crisis is not the only unwelcome surprise to confront us this month. Our pledge campaign goal of a 4.6% increase in pledge income was based in part on an estimate that the cost for building maintenance and operations in 2008 would go up by 9.5% over the previous year. After the first eight months of 2008, building costs have in fact increased by more than 25%. Our pledge goal for next year may have severely underestimated the magnitude of what is needed. This year's campaign will have to overcome some unexpected obstacles. But God never promised that it would be easy.

Unexpected obstacles are at the center of the wilderness journey of the Hebrews in Exodus 17. After a long day of arduous travel they arrived at a place called Rephidim. They were exhausted and desperate for water. They were many miles from an oasis. They began to fear that Moses was lost and leading them into a terrible disaster.

The scripture writer tells us that the people grumbled about Moses' failure of leadership. At this moment many regretted having made this journey and longed to be back in Egypt. The demeaning conditions and exploitation they experienced in Egypt no longer seemed so bad. The problems they faced in Egypt seemed small compared to the challenges which confronted them in the wilderness.

When the Hebrews arrive at Rephidim, where there is no water, they assume that they face a crisis of survival. But they are wrong about that. It is instead a crisis of faith. They have already forgotten that God has called them out of Egypt and into the wilderness. Egypt is about owning and consuming. It is about controlling resources. In Egypt people assume that they are the owners of their own days. God did not tell the Hebrews to work their way up the ladder of that "ownership society." God did not chart a course of liberation which called for the Hebrews to throw off the yoke of oppression so they could move into positions of power and influence in Egypt. God called them to leave Egypt behind so they could learn to live in dependence on him. God wanted them to understand that we are not the owners of our days. Each day is a gift from God.

The only way out of Egypt for the Hebrews was through the wilderness where unexpected obstacles threaten them. In the face of these obstacles the call to return to the "good old days" in Egypt can have a powerful appeal. Egypt is all the more appealing because in the wilderness it becomes more difficult to sort out perceptions from reality. The Israelites came to perceive the wilderness as a God forsaken place. They understood the wilderness as the place where the forces of death are stronger than the structures of life. This perception causes them to dread the future.

But the Hebrews were wrong about the wilderness. Their skewed perception keeps them from recognizing the truth about the wilderness until Moses strikes the rock. The wilderness outpost of Rephidim is not as barren as it looks. An abundance of water is trapped in an underground rock formation. When Moses strikes the rock the water rises to the surface. This water has the power to nourish their thirsty souls. And in that moment the people are confronted with the surprising truth that the wilderness is ruled by God's grace. That grace empowers them to celebrate the fact that they are not the owners of their days. Each day is a gift from a gracious and loving God. Each day is to be received with gratitude. That is what stewardship is all about.

In preparing to lead a study on John Calvin in October, I have learned something about his early life that I never noticed before. Between the ages of 21 and 27 Calvin had to deal with a lot of turmoil. His father lost his job as the business administrator of the cathedral in Noyon, France. While under investigation for financial malfeasance he died. John was finishing his university studies and trying to decide about his future. He was trained to be a priest. He was trained to be a lawyer. He had come to care deeply about the reform of the church and had to decide whether to be ordained as a priest and try to reform the church from within or to break with the old church and join the Reformation.

During this time of turmoil Calvin was wandering from place to place. In this period of six years he never stayed in one location for more than three or four months. During most of this time he depended on the hospitality of his friends. These years in the wilderness taught Calvin that he was not the owner of his days. He learned to live in dependence on God's grace. It was during this time of wandering that Calvin wrote the first edition of his classic book, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Its content is shaped by what he learned from trusting God in the wilderness. This book changed the course of the Reformation.

This is the point that Jesus makes to the religious leaders who challenge his ministry in the 21st chapter of Matthew. These leaders are anxious to preserve the religious institution which they serve. They see the temple under threat from the Romans on one side and the revolutionary zealots on the other. They see Jesus as someone who is undermining their efforts to maintain the institution. But Jesus invites them to recognize that they are not the owners of their days. Neither can they control the future. What they can do is leave Egypt behind and place their trust in God. Jesus invites them to be part of what God is doing in the world.

This is the truth that guides our 2009 stewardship campaign. To be "in the world for ministry" is to joyfully participate in what God is doing in our midst. Our gifts of time, talent, and treasure are expressions of trust in the God who is with us in our wilderness journeys.