

# **ROAR: Change Happens**

**Exodus 16:1-2**

*When life changes, God is good!*

A sermon preached by  
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves  
First United Methodist Church  
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Opening video: Dorothy finds herself in Oz, and says, “Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

How quickly things can change. Little Dorothy, picked up by a tornado in Kansas (which was portrayed in the movie in black-and-white, you remember), ends up in Oz, a land of color and beauty. Most tornados are not that friendly.

A week ago, the floodwaters were rising in Fort Smith. People had moved or were moving their belongings out or up and preparing for the worst. And the worst came, a flood of historic proportions, the worst since 1943.

We have two sisters in our church who remember the 1943 flood quite well. Zeta Smith and Mel Santos were kids growing up on Arbuckle Island, east of Kibler, west of Cecil, not far downriver from Fort Smith. It had been raining, and their mother turned on the battery-powered radio and heard a warning for people on Arbuckle Island to get off as quickly as possible. She began to pack up their things even as the water began rising. She stuffed her dishes and silverware, what little they had, into an icebox. (That’s the predecessor to refrigerators, kids.) But the water rose so fast, there was no time to escape with any belongings. Some neighbors came by in a boat and took the family to higher ground. Zeta and Mel, ages 4 and 10, lay down in the bottom of the boat, scared to death.

The flood wiped everything off Arbuckle Island. Zeta and Mel’s father eventually had to take the family to California to start over. But a few weeks later, the family icebox was found, washed up on the riverbank near Ozark, miles downstream. The latch had stayed closed, and the dishes and silverware were still in it.

There’s grace in every change. In the last few days, we have seen grace upon grace as neighbors and friends have pitched in to help people move. Forces are now mobilizing to clean up the mess left behind. We will be part of that relief effort. We will see an outpouring of compassion and concern over the next few weeks, and it will help the victims deal with the damage—physical, emotional and spiritual.

Life is full of changes. Some changes are good. A couple gets married. A student graduates. A baby is born. You get a promotion at work. Good changes.

Other changes are not so good. You get sick. Someone you love dies. There's an accident that causes traumatic injury. There's a natural disaster, and your life takes a different path. All of a sudden, you find yourself living into a new reality, trying to find a new normal, trying to keep your head above water—sometimes literally!

We've been following the story of Moses and the Hebrews in Egypt for the past couple of weeks. The children are going to hear these stories in Vacation Bible School starting a week from tomorrow. We talked about how the Israelites came into Egypt, and how unfairly they were treated, eventually becoming slaves. Last week we talked about the plagues that God inflicted on the Egyptians in an attempt to liberate them from slavery. That was pretty scary stuff. In all these things, we saw that God is good. When life is unfair, God is good. When life gets scary, God is good. Today we want to make a further claim: when life changes, God is good.

The Hebrews were finally allowed to leave, but the new reality was nothing like the old life they had been used to. Sure, they were free. But they were also out in the wilderness. In Egypt, there was abundant food and water, if not freedom. How were they going to feed and water hundreds of thousands of people and their animals?

To make matters worse, no sooner were they outside of Egypt than Pharaoh changed his mind again and came after them. They could see the chariots of Pharaoh coming across the horizon, and they were backed up against a body of water. Popular mythology calls it the Red Sea; the Hebrew says "Sea of Reeds." But we all know what it looked like when Charlton Heston parted the waters in the movie "The Ten Commandments." Most likely it wasn't that deep or dramatic.

But the fact is, whatever body of water it was, God sent a wind that parted the water and dried up the ground, and the Hebrews walked across. When Pharaoh and his chariots attempted to follow them, the water was released, and the army pursuing the Hebrews was destroyed.

This deliverance caused great celebration. One of the earliest snippets of Hebrew poetry is the song Miriam, the sister of Moses, sang on the shore after the Egyptians were destroyed. She and her backup singers pulled out their tambourines and started singing, “*Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.*”<sup>1</sup>

Leaving the sea, Moses led the Hebrews into the wilderness. After three days, they had found no water. Finally they found one little bitter, brackish pool, but it was undrinkable. God showed Moses a piece of wood, which he threw in the water, and it became drinkable. Problem solved. Then they crested the hill, and on the other side of the hill was a huge oasis—twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, a little bit of paradise in the wilderness. Again God provided. What a relief!

Several years ago, my wife Carey and her cousin were taking their kids across the wilderness to visit some family in west Kansas. It was pretty desolate, and the gas was getting low in the car. Then the three kids—Abby was about 9—began to need bathrooms, so they had to stop at the first gas station available. Soon one appeared on the horizon, but it didn’t look promising at all. It was an old, dilapidated building with one pump and an old, grungy mechanic running the place. The restrooms were what you might expect—sink turned black from the mechanic’s greasy hands, no evidence of cleaning having *ever* been done. Almost a decade later, Abby remembers it was so nasty she didn’t even want to touch the toilet paper! So they quickly filled up and emptied (if you know what I mean), and got back on the road. About a minute down the road, they came around a curve, and there was an oasis—a new, multi-pump, bright and shiny gas station with a convenience store to boot. They didn’t stop again.

But the Hebrews did. They camped at the oasis for a couple of months, until Moses took them out into the wilderness again. This time they ran out of food. They had been in the wilderness for over two months, and nobody was farming, so they were hungry. The people complained to Moses, “We had plenty to eat in Egypt. Better to die as slaves with full bellies than to die in the desert from hunger.” So Moses went to God with the complaint, and God provided again. Every evening quails would cover the camp—apparently slow quails—and everyone would have meat for supper. In the

morning, they would wake up and find a bread-like substance on the ground. They said, “What is it?” and they called it manna, because “What is it?” in Hebrew sounds like “manna.” The manna and quails continued for forty years until the Hebrews crossed over into the Promised Land after Moses died. I’m sure by then they were complaining that they were sick of manna and quails every day.

Finally the Hebrew people got to the mountain of God, sometimes called Mount Horeb, sometimes called Mount Sinai. But they had been without water again for a while. So they complained to Moses again, using the same line about it being better back in Egypt. (Did you ever notice that whenever the people of God start making progress, there is always a group that wants to go back to Egypt?) Moses asked God to do something, because they were about to stone him. So God instructed Moses to strike the holy mountain with his miracle staff, and water would come out, and the people could drink. And that’s exactly what happened.

The mountain of God is kind of a high-profile place, and you can’t smuggle in a few hundred thousand Hebrews without someone taking notice. So here came the Amalekites to protect their turf. Moses sent Joshua to engage the enemy, and Moses took his post on the mountain with the staff of God to encourage the troops. When Moses stood up and raised his arms, Israel prevailed. But remember, Moses was 80 years old at the time. After a while, he got tired. But when he lowered his arms, the Amalekites would start winning. So finally Aaron, Moses’ brother, and another guy named Hur came alongside to help. They gave Moses a rock to lean on, and they held up the arms of Moses as long as the battle took. So Joshua defeated the Amalekites, and the stage was set for the encounter of Moses and the Hebrews with the God who called them out of slavery.

In the space of a few months, the Hebrews had been through some massive changes. Their reality changed. They were living a new normal. But through every change, God had proved faithful. God had provided for their needs. When life changes, God is good.

What do these ancient stories say to our faith today? I don’t have to tell you that change is hard; you know it well enough. Even good changes are tough. Try moving to a new town, learning a new job, getting married,

having a baby—changes are exhausting. Not to mention the more difficult changes that bring destruction and despair into your world.

When changes hit us, God is there. God provides. God is good. God is faithful. Whatever the Hebrews needed as they transitioned back into a wilderness people, God gave it: water in the desert, manna and quails to fill their stomachs, strength and courage for battle. You name it; God gave it!

Today God provides what we need in times of change. Our faith gives us anchors in the storm. Or maybe more appropriately, faith gives us sandbags against the floods of life.

God gives us the sandbag of prayer. When we are troubled or weary or worried or anxious, we can go to God in prayer. We can spend time wrapped in God's spirit. As the hymn says, "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer."<sup>2</sup>

God gives us the sandbag of Scripture. When we are lost and need direction, we turn to the word of God to focus our thoughts and set our feet on the path again. Everything around us may change, but God's word is steadfast and unchanging. The Letter to the Hebrews says it: "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*"<sup>3</sup>

God gives us the sandbag of community. When we need help, God comes to us through the compassion and care of people around us. When Moses couldn't hold up his arms anymore, his brother and a friend came alongside to help, and their help won the day for Israel. I think of all who have helped in the last week with the flood. It is truly amazing how people respond in times of crisis. As odd as it seems to say, I believe these disasters are going to be good for Fort Smith, because we are going to experience community. We are going to see people at their best in the coming weeks.

And finally, God gives us the sandbag of worship. When everything is changing, when the waters are deep and the winds are strong, we need a place where we can find sanctuary. We need a place where we can reliably meet God. We need a place that is familiar and good and peaceful and healing. That's where we are in worship. When you come forward in a

minute, and you take the bread and dip it in the cup and you taste Jesus, you know his grace is here. His grace is sufficient. His love is enough.

Hunger activist Sara Miles, in her memoir called *Take This Bread*, shares how the first time she ever took Communion changed her life forever.

One early, cloudy morning, when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans—except that up until that moment I'd led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything.

Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer but actual food—indeed, the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people.

And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I had experienced.<sup>4</sup>

Through prayer, Scripture, shared community, worship and sacrament, through all the changes of life, God is good. As we come to the Table today, rest assured. Rest assured that whatever changes, God is faithful. God gives us anchors in the storm. God gives us sandbags in the flood. When life changes, God is good—all the time!

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 15:21.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph M. Scriven, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” *United Methodist Hymnal*, #526.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 13:8.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Miles, *Take This Bread* (Ballantine Books, 2008), xi.