

## “Life’s Global Positioning System, Part 2: We’re Not the First”

Exodus 14:1-14

September 14, 2008

The Rev. Christine Chakoian

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

Yesterday our family went down to Champaign Urbana for the football game. The game was OK – we won, even though we played badly – but what was really fun was wandering around the campus. John and I are both alums – me my undergraduate, him all the way through his PhD – so it was a bit of a trip down memory lane. Now John spent more years there, and has been back more often, so he knew his way around pretty well. But I confess I was really lost. I have to admit it was really unsettling. Some of the signposts were just the same – the Illini Union and the quad, of course – but so much had changed, I didn’t know where I was. Now, it’s one thing to feel disoriented in a new territory. But it’s downright weird to feel lost in what was once familiar territory. I’ll admit I don’t like it one bit.

Last week we began our sermon series “Life’s Global Positioning System” – in which I suggest that the era we’re living in is just like that: we’re traveling in what was once familiar territory, only so much has changed, and keeps changing fast. The old routes we took, the old signposts we relied on, the old map we followed – they don’t quite make sense anymore. This era we call simply “globalization.”

Globalization. Often we use it as a short-hand for the global economy: that massively tangled web spun of the finances of countries and multi-national corporations and non-governmental organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. But honestly, that’s just one of many *results* of globalization. Globalization is inaugurated by the connection of previously unconnected peoples, made possible by a new means of communication and/or transportation emerges that connects previously unconnected peoples. These new connections introduce a period of rapid

expansion – and with that expansion, massive destabilization. What used to be, no longer is – and something new is emerging.

Last week I suggested four signposts of globalization:

1. A collision of ideas and people – what Samuel Huntington called the “Clash of Civilizations.”
2. Conflicting reactions to the change – progressives on the one end wholeheartedly embrace it; conservatives on the other end defend old values and identity.
3. Unstable power and authority – which we’ll talk about more later.
4. And finally, rapid, unpredictable change that produces both anxiety and opportunity.

Next week we’ll examine our own era of globalization, and what this means to our life and faith. For today, I want to look back to a couple of earlier periods of globalization – not just to test my theory, but to encourage us with the stories of faithful pilgrims who have gone this way before – and their experience of God’s presence in the midst of change. Listen now for the reading from Exodus 14:1-14.

Since the ancient Israelites first left Egypt – not knowing where they were headed, but knowing they couldn’t turn back – the people of God have been displaced again and again and again. In retrospect, we know how the story of the Red Sea ends. They end up in the land of the promise, and begin a new life – a new life as a nation. But they didn’t know that then.

Even though they’d lived in horrible slavery – under the cruel and capricious reign of Pharaoh – the life of oppression was the only life they

knew. Even though Moses was confident about the rightness of the future, all they saw was Pharaoh's pursuing armies closing in on them on the one side and the impassable Red Sea facing them on the other. We can understand why they might not wholeheartedly trust the promises of God.

Now, the Israelites' experience wasn't really an experience of globalization, but it is a fabulous metaphor for living through an age of upheaval. You know you can't go backward; you're not sure how you're going to go forward; and all the reassurances in the world sound like pretty empty spin. That's what massive change does. Next week we'll explore our current, post-modern period of globalization, and all the upheaval it's bringing. But we're hardly the first to go through such massive change. And I think we have something to learn from those who've gone before us. So today I want to look briefly at two other eras of globalization: the time of Jesus, and, 1500 years later, the period of the Reformation.

It's hard for us to imagine it now, but there was a time before roads were invented. Oh, there were paths, of course, and Bedouins traveled their well-worn routes. But there wasn't a *system* of roads. The Persians were the ones who started it when they ruled the world. But it was Alexander the Great who availed himself of this marvelous tool, and marched his troops across the region to create the largest Empire the western world had ever known. By the time the Romans took over, well-built roads crisscrossed the region, creating fast transportation to take goods and peoples and ideas from what is now England all the way to India. The cities – the commercial centers of the Empire – enjoyed an ever-expanding, exotic array of new goods and ideas, languages and peoples. Think of the scene at Pentecost, according to the book of Acts, when Jews from all around – Medes, Persians, Parthians, Greeks, et al, converged on Jerusalem. If that was true in Jerusalem, can you imagine the

babble of tongues in a major port city like Corinth? The novelty was *intoxicating*.

But not everybody embraced the change. Villages that had barely seen other peoples were exposed to fabulous new things ... but they weren't always sure they liked them. The relationships and values they'd known for countless generations felt threatened, and with it their core identity. Religious authorities were also skeptical, and for good reason. In the Jewish community, the Temple priests were now competing for authority with the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Gnostics, zealots, and Christians – not even counting the Stoics, Platonists, Cynics and other philosophers, plus the smorgasbord of magicians, mystery religions, and pagan gods. The average person was swamped by this New Age smorgasbord of religions.

Yet it is also this very stew of ideas that set the stage for Christianity to emerge! Globalization had peaked the curiosity of many – some who enjoyed dabbling in exotica, some who deeply savored learning, and still others who were starving with a spiritual hunger. The apostle Paul himself was not only an educated Jew but also trained in Greek philosophy, and he was well aware of the market for ideas in the Empire. Christianity would have remained a tiny Jewish sect in virtually any other period of time. Is it so impossible to imagine that God was leading his people across another Red Sea to freedom?

Indulge me one other history lesson. Fast forward to the dawn of the Reformation: another period of massive change.

Historian David Landes in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* reminds us that the period before the Reformation brought with it the invention or recovery of, among other things: 1. the water wheel (allowing manufacturing); 2. eyeglasses (allowing work with fine instruments); 3. improved shipbuilding

and navigation (allowing competition for control over commodities like sugar and gold); and 4. gunpowder (allowing, sadly, the decimation of native populations); and, of course, 5. the printing press (allowing the dissemination of ideas) (David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are So Rich and Some So Poor* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1999), pp. 45-87).

With this boom in communications and technological, the old order could not stay the same. The burghers and their guilds pressed for power against the aristocracy. Scientific discoveries rocked the world and threatened the church. Humanist thinking gave rise to the radical notion of the individual's potential. Authority was up for grabs, and conflicts were fierce. And out of this upheaval, among other things, emerged the revolution that we've come to call the Reformation.

It was around 1450 that Gutenberg began printing the Bible – until then, of course, only priests had ever seen a Bible, if they were lucky. By 1500, one source tells us, printing houses had been established in more than 2500 cities across Europe. Where it used to be that libraries carried 20 volumes, now 15 million books were in existence, including 30,000 new book titles (<http://www.ideafinder.com/history/inventions/printpress.htm>). Every single parish now had access to the Bible, and every religious thinker could print tracts, and Martin Luther could print his 95 theses on the door at Wittenberg and start a revolution. Even the way worship was conducted changed. Prior to the Reformation, the priest faced the altar, the people very rarely took the sacraments, the mass was said only in Latin, the common believer depended on the clergy for absolution, for understanding, for access to anything holy. Calvin and Luther turned it around – putting the Bible in the people's hand, conducting worship in the vernacular, even establishing a Lay Academy so that people could be well equipped to live their own faith everyday. “The priesthood of all believers” is what they called it, and it was nothing short of

revolutionary. Is it possible, just possible, that God was leading his people again, through the wilderness of this globalized world?

What difference does this make to us? Plenty! Next week we'll look more closely at our era of globalization, and what it's doing to us and our faith. But for now, let this suffice: whenever there's been a time of massive change, when contact speeds up between peoples, and communication explodes, and cultures collide – everything turns upside down. But one thing every era teaches us is this: God is in the midst of us, and will lead us safely through.

Indeed, the beautiful hymn we are about to sing was written by John Calvin at the height of the upheaval that his people faced. May his prayer be our prayer, as we face the changes of our global era.

*I greet Thee, who my sure Redeemer art,  
My only trust and Savior of my heart,  
Who pain didst undergo for my poor sake;  
I pray Thee from our hearts all cares to take.*

*Our hope is in no other save in Thee;  
Our faith is built upon Thy promise free;  
Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,  
That in Thy strength we evermore endure.*