

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Proper 6 -- Year A
June 17-18, 2023
Exodus 19:2-8a; Romans 5:1-8
St. Matthew 9:35-10:8-23

Without asking for a show-of-hands, I'd be willing to bet that most of you would agree that a major flood on the top of a mountain is highly unlikely. But, I'm here today to tell you that it is not impossible. It was the summer of 1955, a summer which Jan Koch and Donna Beck may well remember for the same reason I do. That summer was the first year that our family was using the house at Pocono Manor in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. It was a house which my grandmother had purchased to help us escape some of the heat of the city. That house sat (and still sits) on the top of Little Pocono Mountain. (And, yes, there is a Big Pocono Mountain a few miles away; it's a state park and a ski resort.) Anyway, ...in August of that year -- remember, it's 1955 -- with seemingly little advance warning, two hurricanes, Connie and Diane, were making their way up the East Coast, but on slightly different trajectories, ...Connie coming up the Susquehanna Valley and Diane over southern New Jersey.

As an aside, my dad was fond of telling the story of when it first started to rain. We were at the railroad station in nearby Pocono Summit, seeing off a family friend. It had actually been a very dry summer, and my dad always remembered the stationmaster seeing the rain and saying, "We can use every drop we can get." Maybe not!

Because, . . .Connie got there first and all-but-stalled. And, then Diane arrived. The two hurricanes all-but-met. And, the combined winds from these two hurricanes were able to hold floodwaters on top of the mountain, with Connie's winds driving the water from one side of the mountain and Diane's winds from the other side. And, as the eye of the second storm passed over, I went outside with my dad, and I can still picture

the four-foot wall of water just down the road from our home, with water as far as we were able to see. And, when these floodwaters released, they wiped out every bridge that would have enabled us to get off of the mountain. I remember watching Army helicopters using the 18th hole of the golf course to bring in urgently needed supplies and to take out anyone in need of medical care. If memory serves, we were trapped there for roughly two weeks. Every bridge in every direction was impassible, either damaged or destroyed.

I tell you this story just to highlight the necessity of bridges, the absolute requirement for bridges in order to sustain life. Without bridges, we are isolated; without bridges, we are cut off. Without bridges, we die.

In today's First Lesson from Exodus, YHWH, the God of Israel, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, charges His people to serve as "a kingdom of priests." So, what is a "priest?" Well, one of the more picturesque words for "priest" is the Latin word "pontifex," from which the title "Pontiff" is derived. And, what is a "pontifex"? Well, "pontifex" is simply a combination of two Latin words: "pons," meaning "bridge," and "facere," meaning "to make" or "to build." A "pontifex," then, ...a priest, ...is someone who builds bridges -- not physical bridges, of course, but relational bridges. A priest is one who overcomes chasms and divides, who provides a "bridge" between two entities which need to be connected or re-connected. A priest provides access. A priest builds bridges without which we die.

And, so, as we heard moments ago, God declared Israel, His chosen people, to be His own people, His "treasured possession," who were to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." They were to become a nation of "bridge builders," building not physical bridges, of course, but relational ones, bridging the chasm between us and God, and, in the process, bridging the chasms which divide us from each other.

If you were paying attention exactly six weeks ago, you would have heard the Apostle Peter using those same words and phrases, co-opting those words and phrases, to describe those who have been Baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." God's charge to us -- to each of us -- then, is no different. Our calling as "God's own people" is to be "bridge builders," bridging the chasms between people and God,...and, in the process, bridging the chasms between people and people.

And, who today can deny the need for such "bridge builders"? Ever since sin entered the picture, ever since sin flooded God's world, and created a chasm between us and God -- Adam and Eve hiding themselves from God -- and, in the process, creating chasms dividing us from each other -- Cain murdering his brother, Abel -- God has needed (and our world has needed) "bridge builders," priests who would build bridges over the chasms epitomized by greed, by envy, by suspicion, by lust, by hatred, by dishonesty, and by the hunger for power. For, without bridges, we are cut off. Without bridges, we are isolated. Without bridges, we die.

And what I find so troublesome is that so much of what passes for "religion" these days is self-centered, self-focused, and self-directed, leading so many people to think that "religion" is all about each of us, individually seeking some form of peace and well-being, and, ultimately, about getting our own little patoots into heaven. But, today, God turns Israel's focus and our focus in the opposite direction, away from our needs and our concerns and our interests -- and outward toward a broken world, divided by culture and economics and language and ideology and grievances, both real and perceived. "You are my bridge builders," God declares, offering understanding where there is controversy, providing healing where there is brokenness, offering companionship where there is loneliness,

offering comfort where there is heartache, offering a gentle touch where life is harsh, and bestowing grace and forgiveness where there is guilt and shame, ..in other words, building bridges over chasms -- even deep chasms -- with the grace and the love of God.

And -- the writer to the Hebrews would be quick to observe -- we can do so, only because of what our Great High Priest has made possible. For, He, our Lord Jesus Christ, is indeed our Great High Priest, God's own Bridge Builder, the only One who could have spanned the ever-growing chasm between us and God, and doing so, even if it meant giving up His life in the "building" of that bridge. For, in truth, without that bridge, we are isolated. Without that bridge, we are cut off. Without that bridge, we die. Thanks to Him, that bridge has been rebuilt.

For roughly two weeks, back in August of 1955, our little community at Pocono Manor was virtually cut off, isolated...no phones, no electricity, food supplies running low. But, the floodwaters receded, and -- with great urgency -- hundreds, maybe thousands, of workers worked 'round-the-clock to rebuild dozens of bridges. And, before long, the word spread throughout our little community at Pocono Manor that the bridge on Route 611 over Swiftwater Creek was now open, and we could now come and go as needed. Supplies could come in, and people could get out.

The need to rebuild and rebuild bridges today -- relational bridges, not physical bridges -- is, if anything, more urgent than ever. Workers are needed. And, so YHWH, the Lord God of Heaven and Earth, ordains us, all of us, a whole "kingdom" of us, as His "priests," as His "pontifices" (if you insist) to build bridges over chasms and to open the highway to life.

Amen