

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

Isaiah 43:16-21

Mark 2:18-22

Many years ago, there was a zany game show on TV called, "Truth or Consequences." The host, Bob Barker, would ask the contestants a very obscure trivial question and after only two seconds, "Beulah the Buzzer" would sound. Even in the rare event the contestant actually answered correctly, the host would reveal that the question had multiple parts. Failing to complete the Truth portion, the contestant would then face Consequences, typically by performing a nutty and embarrassing stunt.

While it was hilarious, and brought home the sobering Truth about life—namely, that our actions and words do have Consequences—sometimes tragically. We all know this from experience and as parents, our job is to continuously warn our children about this reality. Jumping on the bed is fun, but it can also be dangerous.

Life's not a game show. As we weave our ways through the shoals of our existence, we try to be as vigilant as possible over the hidden rocks and reefs that would sink our ships. It is not always possible to see them all or even to avoid them, but your chance of safe passage increases with knowledge, experience and anticipation. Our Old Testament lesson for this morning makes a point of failing to anticipate Consequences. In the fifth century BCE, the Hebrew tribe was actually comprised of two kingdoms--Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Like our country during the Civil War years, they were not allies, but enemies. Isaiah was a prophet who emerged in Judah during a very complicated political situation. Judah was facing a possible invasion from the combined armies of Israel and Syria (imagine that alliance today!). Isaiah advised the king to rely upon God for protection through purity of worship and devotion. _But instead, the king chose to seek umbrage under the wing of Assyria, the quickly emerging power in the ancient Middle East. He failed to foresee possible Consequences of that move. It turned out to be a case of hiring the fox to guard the henhouse. Assyria turned

on them and put the people into bondage to serve as slaves. Our passage today was composed during the latter stages of that bondage when freedom was close to being restored.

Truth or Consequences? When we explore the issue theologically, we find an ironic twist. We all know words and actions have Consequences. In the secular world, we have our laws, we have our social mores, we have our cultural expectations and if violate any of these, we may pay a price—especially since we would likely be exposed on social media!

But what about the spiritual world and our relationship to God? Is God simply a mirror image of a parent, policeman, or judge? The scriptures contain countless rules and codes of behavior and we are all going to violate many of these, perhaps repeatedly. So what are the Truth and Consequences we face with God? Should we fear God's reprisal? Does God desire for us to be tightly bound towards afraid of making mistakes, petrified of displeasing the Almighty and incurring everlasting wrath? Recall that it is God's nature to forgive. "Cease to dwell on days gone by and to brood over past history." If we punish ourselves for our mistakes, are we really doing anything more than serving our egos, trying to make ourselves feel better by feeling worse. Does God benefit from that?

No, the God of the Bible is a God of evolution, a God of growth, a God of new beginnings--continuously. "Here and now I will do a new thing; this moment it will break from the bud. Can you not perceive it? I will make a way even through the wilderness and paths in the barren desert."

On how many levels can we see this working? Part of the problem we face as a church, as a nation and as individuals is that we keep trying to rework old ideas and policies trying to make them fit new circumstances which results in paralysis. We can't go forward and we certainly cannot go back. And there we remain stuck--angry, frustrated and increasingly hopeless. That's how the Judeans felt!

But Isaiah wants the people to listen, to believe in going forward and to be open to the Spirit breaking through the bud. It is innovation that keeps the world moving onward. It is new

perceptions of what it means to be a diverse culture that puts us on the road to peace and acceptance of one another, using the gifts that we all bring. It is opening ourselves to new visions of who we are and what our mission can be in the community that keeps the church alive and vibrant. Of course, there are failures. We must accept that. To perceive the bud breaking open requires faith. Isaiah reminds the people of their escape from bondage at the hands of the Egyptians. While our faithfulness to our proclaimed values is always prone to being weakened by our human frailty, God's is not. God cannot be tempted to change sides. God's love for us is pure and unconditional. That is the Truth we are asked to trust.

So, what puts up the stop sign inside of us when it comes to trusting that? Why is it that we are wary of the new and different? Maybe we like our comfortable old coats--even though they are full of holes. And why bother with new skins? The old ones work just fine! We've done it this way forever. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Is it our fear Consequences that keep us tethered to the past? We tend to live by the old axiom that it is better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt. Perhaps it is anxiety over the anticipated Consequences of failure that keep us chained to old notions and ways of doing things that cannot possibly meet the new challenges we face.

New wine for new skins! Look at life. What stays the same? Life is movement. Life is dynamic. Can you prevent spring from emerging? Can you hold back a waterfall? Everything alive is in constant motion--forward.

The first task before us is to believe there is guidance if we are open to perceiving it. As this congregation works to discern what steps can be taken to revitalize and sustain it, we must open ourselves to new ideas trusting the Spirit to lead and inspire us. If we do not dwell on days gone by or brood over past history, God might just surprise us!. It is the same with our lives. When we are faithful to our spiritual practices, when we take the time to quietly contemplate where God is moving in our lives, we find paths through the wilderness, we discover water flowing in the desert. God is faithful. That is the Truth. We determine our

own Consequences.

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September 5, 2021

