There’s an old story of a pastor who sat in his office, and was struggling with what to say when he got up on Sunday morning. Stumped, he finally gave up and said “I guess the Holy Spirit will tell me what to say on Sunday morning.” The thought returned to him the next day in his office, and the next and the next. As he approached the pulpit on Sunday morning, he prayed for guidance from the Holy Spirit, when he heard a celestial voice say to him “Tell the people you are unprepared.”

“You need only be still” must have been one of the hardest things a group of people had ever heard.

Here they are, having wandered through the North African desert for who knows how long, thirsty and parched, when on the horizon they see a cloud of dust approaching and hear the hoof beats of war chariots.

An army in front of them, an ocean behind them.

Imagine you are in the story. Imagine you haven’t heard this story a hundred times before. Imagine you don’t know what’s coming next. How do you respond?

Do you do what God says, and be still – with the army bearing down on you?

There’s something inside us that pushes back against waste of every kind. Scottish Presbyterians don’t have the market cornered here. We’re wired evolutionarily to reject waste of every kind because you never know when you’re going to need that broken pen, or that obsolete phone. We’re wired that way because at a primal level, we don’t really know where our next meal is going to come from if we don’t go out and get it.

The Israelite reaction isn’t that strange when you consider all that.

They look at everything that’s happened, everything that they’ve given up, and all they see is waste.

“Have you brought us out into the desert because there weren’t enough graves for us in Egypt” they ask? – was everything that we’ve been through up to this point a waste?

All their frustration, all their anxiety, and all their fears are aimed squarely at Moses.

But what they’re really saying is Fix it. Give us meaning. Make it so that all the crap we’ve gone through since we left Egypt amounts to something. Tell us to drown ourselves in the sea so that we can die as free people. Or tell us to charge headlong against the greatest army the world has ever seen so we can go down with a fight. Tell us to do something to give all this meaning!

And yet, with all the voices screaming at him, Moses hears the voice of God remind him that, despite all the panic being heaped on you, despite your own shortcomings as a leader, despite the anxiety and the pressure that you feel in this moment, You need only be still.

Why? Because I think God wanted Moses to learn something from what was about to happen, but also because God wanted us, who’ve been telling this story for the last four thousand years, to apply this principle to our day to day lives.

**The choice to be still is the only non-binary option.** For the Israelites, it seemed like there were only two options: die by the hand of Pharaoh, or die in the waters of the red sea. Two bad options, but as soon as you pick one, the other option is closed off. You can’t have both. For the most part, we view our own actions in this kind of binary. We take the dog for a walk, or we don’t. We offer to help or we don’t. Most of the time, Yoda is right – do or do not. There is no try.

Once upon a time in Springfield, the Simpson family visited a new supermarket. Monstromart’s slogan was “where shopping is a baffling ordeal”. Product choice was unlimited, shelving reached the ceiling, nutmeg came in 12lb boxes and the express checkout had a sign reading, “1,000 items or less”. In the end the Simpsons returned to Apu’s Kwik-E-Mart. In doing so, the Simpsons were making a choice to reduce their choice. It wasn’t quite a rational choice, but it made sense. In philosophical terms, it’s called the paradox of Buridan’s Donkey – where a donkey who is equally hungry and thirsty is placed equidistant to a bucket of water and a bucket of hay and starve to death, unable to make a rational choice one way or the other. The choice to be paralyzed is, in itself, a choice.

But being still isn’t the same thing as being paralyzed. Paralysis is a choice to reject the options. Being still is a choice to reject the outcome. In a binary world, the Israelites assumed they knew what the outcome was going to be. Death had found them in the desert. But God had another story to tell.

God wanted Moses to lead beyond the binary nature of life, and because he would be the one to pass God’s law onto them, God wanted Moses to see that there’s a kind of freedom in prohibition. Let me give you an example: Which scenario gives you more freedom – you must exit the Sanctuary by the door next to the organ, or do not exit the Sanctuary by the door next to the organ? There’s a grace in God telling Moses not to act because it upends the binary nature of Moses’ choice. All of a sudden, it’s not a choice between die by the hand of Pharaoh, or die in the waters of the red sea. Now there’s an option C.

**Stillness is the best way to get ready for what comes next.**

I noticed this during the world series this year, but next time you watch a baseball game, keep an eye on the pitcher. They’re masters of using their body to produce an enormous amount of physical force on a baseball, but in the second before they release the ball watch their body. Every muscle relaxes for a split second before the pitcher transforms himself into a catapult. That second of stillness allows the pitcher to fully activate their myotatic reflex, letting their arm muscles contract and expand with the explosive power to throw a baseball more than 60 feet in four tenths of a second. All that in a split second of stillness.

Being still forces our mind, heart, soul, and strength to get on the same page. In just 60 seconds of stillness, your brain sends a signal your kidneys to produce a hormone called DHEA which slows your heart rate, reduces anxiety and has been proven to reverse the effects of aging. When you look at it, it sure seems like God wired us for stillness and our discontent with it is the real problem we need to deal with.

Stillness is a discipline that sets us up to see what God is going to do next.

**Because God does his best work when the odds are stacked against him.**

This story has staying power because something in it resonates beyond its own context. Today is not the first time the church has felt like we’re faced with an army in front of us and an ocean behind us. There’s a reason that we’ve kept telling and retelling this story for the past five thousand years. It’s truth goes beyond the words on the page.

And it still resonates with me today.

None of us signed up for this. St. Andrew’s has prided itself being a multi-staff church for a long time and we’ve been blessed to be able to call three Ministers to three very different calls. I came here two years ago thinking that I knew what I was signing up for. You called me here thinking you knew what you were signing up for too.

But now here we are, stuck on the beach with time bearing down on us. Feeling stuck in this moment is a natural response. We feel like the challenges that the church is facing in the twenty-first century are insurmountable. We feel like we need three Ministers to do all the work that needs to be done. We’re frustrated that things haven’t worked the way we wish they would. And so with the Israelites we ask God, were there not enough graves for us in Egypt? Is that why you brought us out to the desert to die? Did we misinterpret your call? Did we miss something? We’re frustrated, discouraged, and fearful. And in the interest of honesty, I’m right there with you.

And if we were anybody other than a church I would be the first one to throw up my hands and say, I’m done. If I thought that its up to Jared to do the work of three Ministers, I’m out. But we are a church and because we are a church we have never been asked to trust our own strength or skill. We tell this story over and over again to remind ourselves that God does his best work when the odds are stacked against him.

And the odds can’t get much more stacked then they are right now.

So let’s watch and see what God does next.