

# The “Why Me?” of Wonder

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Exodus 13:1-8

Some of you have had the chance to travel to the beaches of Normandy, France which served as the stage of one of the greatest military invasions in modern history. Many of us have seen the scores of movies that have sought to depict the fateful day of June 6, 1944 when the Allied forces stormed the beaches of Omaha, Utah, Juno, Gold and Sword – and where thousands of men lost their lives. I’ve had the chance on two occasions to walk those beaches and to visit the American cemetery above Omaha Beach – the sea of white marble that serves as the final resting place of nearly 10,000 American boys. It is a sacred place where one is overwhelmed by the scale of life and sacrifice. My second visit to Normandy was in the company of two old soldiers – Jake McNiece and Jack Agnew – who in 1944 were American paratroopers in the 101st Airborne Division and served in an elite demolition unit affectionately known as the Filthy Thirteen. A movie was made about them – called The Dirty Dozen. I don’t have the time to tell you how it was that I came to visit Normandy with these men – but I will tell you about visiting the American cemetery with them. These two old men walking through this sea of white stones some of which carried names of young men they knew. Young men they trained with, young men they jumped with, young men they fought with. We walked with these men as they sought

the stones of those they knew – and before them paused and prayed. Later when I had the chance to sit and talk with Jake and Jack I asked them what was going through their minds when they walked through that cemetery. And both of them in the very same second said, “Why me?” It wasn’t the “why me?” of complaint or lament. It was the “why me?” of wonder. It was the “why me?” of wondering how it was that they got to live to tell about it. The “why me?” of wondering how they got to live another fifty years and get married and have children and grandchildren and walk in Memorial Day parades and enjoy the VFW Fish Fry and attend their Airborne company reunions. Why me? Why it is that I survived – why is it that I was delivered – why is it that I get to come back and give thanks for those who paid the greatest price. They knew it wasn’t because they deserved it. They knew it wasn’t because they were any better soldiers. They knew it wasn’t because God loved and protected them any more than the others. All they had was the “why me? of wonder.” The why me of living in the mystery of grace and fortune.

There probably is not a more dramatic event in which to consider the wonder of “why me?” than the randomness of the battlefield. But the truth is it wouldn’t take much for you and me to come up with our own “why me’s?” of wonder. Moments or seasons or chapters in our lives that we can look back upon and wonder why is it that I got to be so fortunate? We may be tempted to explain it – to chalk it up to our own ability, or our own ingenuity, or our own faith, or own prayers, or our own God. But of course the why me of wonder is so much bigger than that. Grace and fortune by definition are not causal events.

“If my life and your life is to have any real meaning – if it is to make any real sense – if it is to have any real purpose – it is to be lived in response to this wonder of why me.”

Somehow a conspiracy of grace was afoot to allow me to live to tell about it.

When I was an inexperienced sixteen year old driver I wrapped the family car – with the family in it – around a telephone pole going fifty miles an hour. And we all walked away from it. I can’t explain that. I especially can’t explain it given the fact that I was a police chaplain for many years and had the unenviable responsibility of informing families and next of kin that their loved one had died unexpectedly – often in car accidents. Don’t ask me to explain it – and please don’t tell me that God was looking after me. Because that would suggest that he wasn’t looking after all the others. Why me? Why do I get to live and tell about it? It’s too big to explain and understand. I’m left only to wonder.

Have you been left to wonder? Have you had those moments of deliverance, those moments of grace, those moments of fortune in your life when the inexplicable happened and you kind of left to look upward or inward – and wonder how was it that you got to be so fortunate? I feel like I won the lottery when I think of the circumstances of my birth, for example – stable family, stable

church, stable country, half a brain to think with – people in my life that invested in me and gave me a chance. I know that does not often happen. I know that the cards get dealt all different kinds of ways. And I don’t begin to understand how or why it happens that way – and am only left to wonder.

Actually, that’s not true. No, I’m not left only to wonder – that’s just half of it. I’m also somehow left to offer some response. If my life and your life is to have any real meaning – if it is to make any real sense – if it is to have any real purpose – it is to be lived in response to this wonder of why me.

It is, I think, the issue that lies behind our story this morning. It is the story of the people of Israel. It is the story about a nation of slaves bound in bondage in Egypt. And it is story about a man named Moses – who goes down, as the anthem tells us, goes down to Egypt in response to God’s call and leads this nation of slaves to deliverance. And they are delivered almost despite themselves. They are delivered from the angel of death. They are delivered from the hardened heart of Pharaoh. They are

delivered through the barrier of the sea. They are delivered from their own fear and hesitation and lack of faith. God seems always wanting to push their story forward, push their story toward the good – even when they keep complaining. And so somewhere in the midst of it, according to our story today, a feast is instituted – they call it the feast of the Unleavened Bread. It's this feast that reminds them that once they were slaves. Once they had no hope. Once they had no way to freedom. But then came Moses, and then came deliverance of the Lord. A deliverance so quick, so sudden – they didn't even have time for their bread to rise. They had to take the flat stuff, the dry stuff – just in order to catch up to the deliverance of the Lord. And so it is this feast that reminds them of their “why me?” Not the “why me?” of complaint – but the “why me?” of wonder. Why, their children will ask, why do we eat the unleavened bread? And they will say – Oh, it's because of the wonder. Dare we call it the Wonder Bread? The bread of the wonder of what the Lord has done. It wasn't because we were smart. It wasn't because we were clever. It wasn't because we were lucky. No there was this conspiracy of grace afoot – and we don't begin to fully understand it --- but life is best lived when we live in response. When we set aside the feast. When we conspire ourselves to live a life of gratitude.

Albert Einstein said it this way: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”

So consider this – today we get to imagine that all around the world, because it's World Communion Sunday, little communities of Christ – little beloved communities – with their little loaves of bread are gathered around their own little tables. And the circumstances around each of these world-wide tables is different. Some tables are surrounded by prosperity, some tables are surrounded by war, some tables are surrounded by persecution, some tables are surrounded by grief, some tables are surrounded by scarcity – some tables are in the cathedrals of Europe and some tables are in the bombed out houses of Syria, and some tables are in refugee camps in Lebanon – but no matter where the tables are and no matter what surrounds them -- there is this world-wide community that understands the story of Israel. That grasps the “why me? of wonder”. The world-wide beloved community that pauses in wonder and stands in awe and marvels in mystery and says, The Lord is good, his steadfast love endures forever and his faithfulness is for all generations. Because we all have these stories, right? These stories of deliverance. These stories of unmerited grace. These stories of winning the lottery of life. These stories of twists and turns that went our way. And the great big story of the Savior who loves us all the way to the cross. And somehow we have resisted the cynicism of the day that might want to suggest that it's been either blind luck – or getting what we deserve. Well, we know it's neither. We know that there is some mysterious conspiracy of grace afoot in our lives trying to push us toward good. And we have been left to wonder. And not just been left to wonder, but invited to respond to wonder.

Oh heavens why me? Well, we get to answer our own question. We are the world communion that gets to answer that question. We are the world communion that gets to live in response to the wonder of why me. Why are we so loved? Why are we still here? Why are we walking these graves? Why are we alive to tell about it?

Well maybe because to be in this communion is to be the hope of the world. Maybe we get to be the one who are an answer to the pessimism and despair. Maybe we get to be the ones who stop complaining about how bad the world is. Maybe we get to be the ones who still believe in the mystery of awe and wonder and grace. Maybe we get to be the ones who are still counting on deliverance. Maybe we get to be the ones who, like Moses, bring the deliverance.

Because aren't you tired of being in bondage to bad news? Aren't you tired of being held captive to fear? Aren't you tired of being a prisoner to cynicism? It's just no way to live. But today we get to join the world-wide counter terrorism unit. We get to gather with the world-wide community of grace and wonder and awe. Today we get to wonder in our own “why me?” And today we get to start answering our own question.



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Church of the Palms

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