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METHODOLOGY: THE HYPOTHESIS

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In the third chapter of the book of Exodus we find Moses tending the flock of his father-in-law when God comes to him in the form of a burning bush and says, "Take off your shoes, you are standing on Holy ground." God gave Moses a call to go back to Egypt, to go back to the place from which he had escaped because people there had been seeking to kill him. "Go back and lead my people, go to Pharaoh and speak to him and call him and challenge him." Moses reluctantly responds. We move forward about 16 chapters and, after Moses has gone back to Egypt, after he has brought his people out of that land of slavery, he brings them into the journey to the land that God has promised them. They had been out about three months when Moses comes back to the very same spot that was Holy ground,

and these are the very first words that he hears from God as he returns.

Listen for the word of our Lord.

Exodus 19:1-6

The Israelites Reach Mount Sinai

At the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'

Paul in the letter to the Romans has another “therefore” that is a therefore that shapes all of our lives. He works through Romans and this beautiful theological treatise and offers him understanding about who Christ is, about who we are as a people of God. He ends that teaching with these beautiful phrases at the end of chapter 11. He then moves straight into what we call the application because they can't be separated.

Let's listen for the word of our Lord.

Romans 11:33-12:2

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who

has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen.

The New Life in Christ

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This is the word of our Lord.

We all know that each of us, whether we were alive or not ten years ago, has been shaped by the events of September 11, 2001. Max the dog and I got up early this morning and sat on the porch waiting for the newspaper to come. It came on time. As I began to look at *The Virginian Pilot*, I saw the wonderful cover page that talks about “*Ten years after 9/11, a look at our world.*” It draws some connections between what was happening ten years ago and what is happening now. For example, in 2001 there were 33 air marshals total in the U.S. Now there are thousands; we actually don't know the number because that is a classified piece of information. We realize that in the last ten years, 16,246 of our service men and women have died. We realize that in 2001 there had been zero democratic elections in Iraq or Afghanistan, and now there have been nine.

We realize that we have been shaken though, as well. We come to realize that we make on average, comparing dollars to dollars, we make per capita more than a thousand dollars less per year than we did ten years ago. We realize that in 2001, the congressional approval rate was 50%, right now it is 13%. This is one that interested me. In 2001 there were 13,938 Virginia issued concealed handgun permits. In 2011 that number has gone to 21,947.

True story, we had a staff person not too many years ago, who was having some staff issues, some struggles, and I needed to sit down with her and talk with her about her performance. I went to her and said, "Listen, we need to sit down and talk about how things are going." She sat down at one side of the table and me the other. She moved a little bit and said, "Oh, I'm a little uncomfortable." Then she pulled out a handgun and placed it on the table, and here I'm talking to her about her performance or her lack of performance and the handgun is right there. She says, "Don't worry; I have a permit for it." Well let me tell you what I did. Very quickly, the very next session meeting, the session voted that we would become a handgun free zone.

I bring up that statistic because it is interesting to me. I do believe that we are shaped irrevocably by 9/11. But I believe we haven't yet crossed over into what its true meaning will be for us. I don't think we have crossed over into a new age. I believe we are in an age right now that has a giant question mark over it. As I look at our nation, I look at us as the people of God within our nation, and I see increased polarization. Increased isolation.

I was always, in the church world, the moderate. I mean I am strong in my belief, I know who Jesus Christ is, my Lord and Savior. I've always been the one that kind of confused people a little bit, kind of the moderate in the midst of it. It's astounding to me, in these recent months, how that has been forbidden for me to be, whether people are on the more conservative end or whether they are on the more liberal end. I have to be labeled. It is astounding to me that there are people that I love and adore, people for whom I've had a long term relationship, who because of perhaps one issue, might feel as if they have to separate in a relationship from me.

Now I'm not saying that to try to get pity in any way. I'm simply saying that it strikes me that we are living in a world in which we are forced or we are forcing ourselves to take up camps. The thing that happens when we build camps is we need warriors. When we make warriors of the camp it is very hard for them to be warriors of God,

instead it is warriors of our cause. So I believe this great question mark is over us as the people of God. Not just speaking about our nation, not just talking about the halls of Congress, but talking about our own dining rooms and our own living.

Seth Godin, who is the most popular blogger in the world – more look at his blog than anybody else’s in the world, is often asked, “What’s going to come after postmodernity?” It’s sort of the big question, you know, for the futurist, “What’s the postmodern world?” Whatever that means, what’s going to come next? Seth Godin says, “I’m probably the only blogger out there who can give you a definite answer.” (Go to his blog and you can see what it is. Then you will know why so many people look at it.)

Godin says, “I can give you the definite answer of what will come after postmodernity, I can guarantee it. It’s this: It’s whatever we choose it to be.” That’s not just a trite little statement. That’s a real statement. That it is really up to us to bring meaning out of the experiences with which you and I have lived. For the last ten years, not solely as a result of what happened ten years ago, but look at what has happened in the fabric and the weaving of our nation and for us as the people of God.

Now Seth Godin is basically using a word that I want to use today. He is saying, “I can guarantee I can tell you what it will be, it will be what we will choose it to be.” He is basically saying there is a “therefore.” Whatever meaning we bring out of our life now will be the determination of what we will do; it will be a “therefore” for us. That’s what we find in both contexts of our Scripture readings today, in the book of Exodus and the book of Romans.

Moses comes back to Mt. Horeb, comes back to Sinai. He was there when God first called him and now God has set his people free. Moses has been a leader of his people. He has journeyed for three months to get back to that sacred spot for him, and they camp.

Here's a trick question that very often comes up: How long did it take our people to get to the promise land? Now we always want to say 40 years. That's the wrong answer. It took them about 18 months to get there. We will talk about that in a moment. But here they are three months into the journey. Three full moon cycles and they come back to Sinai, they come to Mt. Horeb and they camp. The thing that is intriguing about it is that they stay there for almost a year. They don't move. For 59 chapters they are in the same location. From the 19th chapter of the book of Exodus to the tenth chapter of the book of Numbers, they don't move.

What God does for 59 chapters and for a full year is give them an intensive course on what it is to be the people of God. What God begins by saying that they are a treasured possession, a priestly kingdom, a holy nation. God is very clear to them that this is not God's plan for them simply as their own people, but this is God's plan for world redemption. He is the God of all. He is the God of all people. He calls these specific people to be what we might want to refer to in words that might seem a little more political for us, a city on a hill set apart so that people would be drawn to us, set apart so that we would be the priestly people that make the sacrifices of our lives for others, set apart so that others might find the fullness of God's plan.

Therefore, he says to them, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, this is what I will do." Now the covenant is not all the rules that follow in the next 59 chapters. The covenant is the covenant that God made with Abraham and with Isaac and with Jacob and that God reaffirmed with Moses in that very spot. God is saying to Moses and he is saying to us that the law and all the things that we need to do, the "therefores," follow the grace, the fact that God has called us.

As the people of God, our lives and how we live and how we live together have implications for the entire world. God spends 59 chapters preparing them, forming them, shaping them, so that they

will be ready to live into the implications for the world as the people of God.

Now, of course, we know what happened. We know that they are three months into the journey; they are a year where they are. They spend three more months journeying to the Promised Land, they reach it, they send spies in; it is the land that God promised them. Twelve spies go in. They bring these huge great things, so big that they have to carry them on poles over their shoulders. They bring in pomegranates by the thousands. They bring them back and lay them down and say, "This is what's there; it's the land that God promised to us, but there are also giants." Then in Numbers it says this, "And we seemed to ourselves as grasshoppers." And so, the people and all the spies but two, Joshua and Caleb, say, "No, we can't go." And so they begin to wander again. After 18 months they get there and they could go right in, God promised it, but they're afraid. So Moses spends the next 38 ½ years of his life trying to teach them that they are not grasshoppers, that who they are as the people of God.

It gets even more interesting than that because, when they start to wander, they become isolated. They start to identify themselves more as a people, a race, than they do as a light, or witness. In the life of Moses and his family, there is a wonderful little story right before they send the spies in. Moses has a sister named Miriam. Miriam saved Moses' life as a little boy. She is the one that put him in the basket and watched after him to make sure that he was okay. He has a brother named Aaron who has been in ministry with him the whole time.

Right before the spies, Aaron and Miriam start to question Moses in his leadership role. They question him because Moses married a black woman. It's in the Bible, in Numbers 12, where Miriam and Aaron accuse Moses of not being worthy of being their leader because he married a Cushite woman. A Cushite was a black woman. What we start to find is that even within Moses' family, this sense of isolation, this sense of "us against them" or us as opposed to them starts to creep in.

It's a beautiful story, though, because of what happens. Miriam is struck with leprosy by God because of her feelings and her actions towards Moses. The Bible says that Moses went before God when he saw the leprosy of his sister, his betrayer. Moses' brother who was standing with her had betrayed him as well. The Bible says there was no more humble man on the face of the earth than Moses. Moses cried out to God and said, "God, heal my sister."

You see, when we stop believing that we are a treasured possession, a priestly kingdom, a holy nation for the glory of God in the world and for the benefit and the welfare of others, it starts to become about me and my family, and my family gets really small really quick. As we'd say in Africa, "Are we together on this?"

It's the same thing that happens in Romans. Romans is the most theological book of the New Testament, but here is the basic premise: there are two ages and you can divide it this way, there is B.C. and there is A.D. Paul believed that there was a life before Christ and there was a life after Christ. Paul says that we live challenged between these two ages. Everyday is a choice for you to decide which age you are going to be in. That's why, in the 12th chapter when he starts providing the application, he says, "therefore," and that "therefore" is the most theological word that I can imagine. "I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice wholly and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

Now you know that this is my pet phrase and, if you've been around me much, you know what those two words are. The word "conformed" is the Greek word "schemata," part of the plan, the scheme, the ordered-ness, sort of the excel chart. The word "transformed" is the word "metamorphosis," new life. What Paul encourages us to do is to say that it is about a daily transformation. You decide everyday whether you live before Christ or whether you are going to live after him. Whether you are going to live in a world

that is going to be shaped by one age or whether you are going to live in a world that is shaped by another.

Now let me ask a question, how many of you know people who are right on that brink? People who are right at that place and who say, "I know he's God, I believe in him, I know he can do these things, but I am just not quite ready to make that full commitment yet." Or people who are just seeking, they're doing their best, they're trying to figure it out, they're trying to sort it out, but they just can't quite just step into the "therefore" yet, they can't quite make that transformational movement yet.

I have a dear friend who is in his 90's, and he has been struggling with that question for over 70 years. He knows it all. He still hasn't been able to make that step to be transformed fully by the kingdom of God. But here is the thing that strikes me: those folks, when they stay back, when they know they should, but they can't quite make it, when they just can't cross over yet, when they stay back, they become more and more isolated, and they start to define their world in smaller and smaller and smaller terms. That's who you and I are very often in our lives.

So what does that mean for us? What does it mean in relation to what has happened ten years ago? I want to go back to an earlier 9/11. In September 1949, President Harry Truman announced to the American people that the Soviets had THE bomb. It rocked our world. I was born close to a decade later, and I can remember all those things. I don't know why we believed in Miami, FL that if they had the bomb in Cuba and were going to missile us, why getting under the desks when you were in the first grade was going to save you, but we all did. If you were my age you used to have the big alarms that would go off and then you'd get under the desk. It changed our lives.

Just a couple of days after Harry Truman announced it, a man who had spent a couple of years beating around in small little towns at saw dust revivals, who never had more than 100 or 200 people ever

come to hear him talk, had already announced that there was going to be a tent revival in Los Angeles. The fear that was generated that we had knowledge that the Soviets had the bomb caused, over the course of a couple of weeks, hundreds of thousands of people come to hear Billy Graham. It's where Billy Graham entered into the world arena. Now many people have used that to attack Dr. Graham. To say that all he did was build on the imperialist ideas that we had as Americans. That he only built on the fear of communism, or the fear of annihilation, that he became apocalyptic in his thinking and that the only reason that anybody was drawn to Dr. Graham was because we were all so afraid we didn't know what to do.

But let's be clear here, since 1949, 2.2 billion people—that's with a "B," have through radio or television or in person encountered Dr. Graham and his three words. Every sermon he has ever preached has only had three words in it even if it has taken forty minutes to say it, and 3.2 million have personally responded to accept the call to the "therefore" in these three words. Here are the three words that Dr. Graham has always said, "God Loves You."

I didn't get that for a long time. I thought, "Well, you know, I'm smarter than that, I can preach better than that. So why aren't 2.2 billion people interested in Jim Wood?" In all honesty, I didn't get it until I started living my life and realized how unlovable I was. The knowledge that God loves me, how much better does it get than that?

Danny Wuerffel, who won the Heisman in 1996, played for the Florida Gators and went on and played for the Saints for a couple years. I think he ended up with the Redskins. Wuerffel was the Heisman Trophy winner in 1996. (By the way, my sister who went to Florida State and who is watching online, is going to be really mad that I'm using the University of Florida example, especially because it's got Steve Spurrier in it. Steve Spurrier is at South Carolina now, and we beat Georgia yesterday, by the way. Every time we win I'm going to get it in. ☺)

Danny Wuerffel was a PK. His dad was a Lutheran pastor and a chaplain in the air force. Wuerffel started a non-profit called "Desire Street Ministries," and he works in New Orleans and Atlanta, a couple of large inner cities, where he is doing amazing things. Not too many years ago, a publisher approached him and said, "You know, you are a Heisman trophy winner, you are doing these great ministry things, we'd love for you to write a book about what your secrets of success are."

So, since every good sermon has three points and every good book has five points, he wrote an outline for "My Five Secrets of Success" and turned it into the publisher who responded, "This doesn't work, it's been done. Instead, why don't you get a little bit more personal? Talk about you and what personally motivates you." So, Wuerffel went back and, as he began to think about it, he said, "You know, I think what it is is that I've always had this voice within me. It's always been there. Every time there has been a door that was locked or closed, this voice within me would say, 'Danny, you are so strong, you could bust through that door,' and I always did." He said, "There was this voice that was always within me that said, 'Danny, you're so smart you could accomplish anything, you could solve any problem,' so I always did." Wuerffel was not only a Heisman trophy winner, but he was a first-team Academic All American. He said, "There was always this voice within me that said, 'Danny you're so fast you can run like the wind.'"

Right as Wuerffel was about to turn in that outline for a book about this inner voice that he has always had that has enabled him to become great, his first child, a son, was born. His baby had just come home from the hospital and his mom was visiting when he walked past the nursery where his mom was holding her grandbaby, his son. She had the door cracked and he heard his mom say this: "Baby boy, you are so strong. Baby boy, you are so smart. Baby boy, you are so fast, you can run like the wind." Immediately Wuerffel realized that it was no inner voice in his life, it was the words of a mother who loved Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior who imprinted them into his very being.

Sheryl swims like a fish. She was always the one that was going to teach the kids to swim. She had them in the pool when they were like seven days old--very young, anyway. "They're used to water," she said, "don't worry about it." Sheryl taught all three of our boys to dive. You know, you teach a kid to dive.... You know they can jump and jump and jump, you teach that kid to figure that out, it's an amazing thing. I had the privilege of being there when each of them took their first dive. Sheryl would always be in the water with them. She'd be out in the water and she'd be calling out, "Come on, come on Ross, come on Rossy, come on Adam, come on Zachy, you can do it, I know you can do it!" The look on her face, man, you'd go to that face no matter what. Yes, it was a look of love and the look of confidence, and the look that said, "Even when I'm asking you to dive or to jump, I LOVE YOU." Sheryl loves me to death, but she can't look at me in the same way that she does with those boys because a mother's love, a parent's love, is part of the love that God has for you and for me.

Now you might look at that and think, "Wow! What a blessing, wasn't it a wonderful thing that these little boys were blessed with a mom who taught them to dive, or a mom who every morning would get them up. I think it's why our kids never wanted to get up in the morning because she would just go in the bedroom and she would look over them and say, "I love you, I love you" with this face and you know.... You might look at that and say, "Isn't it an amazing thing that God blessed them with her love," and that's true.

But on Wednesday morning, I got an email from Kenya. Two of our little girls whom we help and support, whom Winston and Eunice Whitehurst have kind of adopted, were going to the garbage dump. On the way they went past the cabbage patch where they saw something move. They went over and found a little baby girl, umbilical cord still on and maybe a day old, wrapped in two black plastic bags with wool stuck in her mouth to block her airway. They went and got a worker to come help. The baby, alive and on the hospital grounds, went to the hospital where it is in an incubator.

That little girl will never have a mother who brought her into this world, who will teach her to dive, who will ever even look over her in the morning and say, "Good morning, Sunshine. I love you." Some people might say because God is so uncaring. But not me and not my people. God didn't bless us with the security and the freedom that we have, God didn't bless us with loving experiences with each other, God didn't bless us with the privileges that we have so that we would think we were treasured possessions; but God blessed us and made us a treasured possession, called us a priestly kingdom, called us a holy nation because God says, "This little child is one who is as much loved by me as any child that has ever come into existence."

You and I have the privilege to make a choice. There is a question mark that is over us. We can continue to isolate ourselves, we can continue to polarize ourselves or we can make a choice today to enter into the cabbage patches of the world. Many of us want to answer that by saying, "Well, we have our own people that have need here." I tell you, I've run this neighborhood all the time, there is not one stinking cabbage patch in Ghent. We can start to say "It's just about me caring for my family and raising my children and doing the best I can with them. I'm overwhelmed by anything."

Or we can be the people who respond to the Word of God who simply says to you today, "God, our Father who loves you so much, who knew the numbers of days, who knows the number of hairs, who formed you in your mother's womb, who simply says to you "I LOVE YOU. Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom of my love for you. I love you so much that I want you today just to step into the water of transformation. No don't even step, dive, because I know you can do it and I love you so much I promise I'll catch you. Don't wait for the bridge; it's not going to be built anyway. Be my 'therefore' for this world today." I believe that is what you and I can do and be. I believe that's who he made us to be. I believe that we really are a treasured possession, a priestly kingdom, a holy nation. I really do. I believe that as the people of God we are called to do incredible things. Our God is a mighty God. All power resides in

him. I believe in that. But I believe that the way that 's going to be known to the world is that they might look at us or they might say that that man that walks, that woman that walks, that child right there, that child, that woman, that man is so humble that there is no one else on the face of the earth who would humble themselves enough to pray for someone else, who had humbled themselves enough, to pray, to live, to give so that this world would know what grace and forgiveness is. That's who we are called to be. That's who we are and that's because God loves us, we are a special people. Let's not squander it on ourselves.