

Today is the first Sunday of the New Year, which means we're all thinking hard about what's in store. We're only five days in, which means most of us are still doing pretty well when it comes to our resolutions. If you're here this morning, I'm going to assume you're curious on some level what God will be doing in your life this year, too.

I bet more than a few of you have begun a Bible reading plan, or resolved to be more prayerful or set a daily devotional time. Many of us are wondering, Is this the year? Is this the year God becomes more real? Is this the year I see God active in my life in a big, undeniable way?

I know there're a few of us in here wondering that because as someone who's trying to follow Jesus myself, I run through those same resolutions and ask those same questions pretty much every year. I keep wondering, Is this the year?

I'm sort of looking for what I call a Big Event. A big miracle. Some sort of flashy spectacle, some phenomenal proof that God is working in my life. Half-jokingly, I think of big neon signs dropping out of Heaven to say HERE IS WHERE GOD IS WORKING IN YOUR LIFE.

Because when I read stories in the Bible about these huge, phenomenal instances of God acting, massive miracle moments, I can't help but get jealous.

I think to myself: How *lucky* are the people that got to see that? Forget that they live in a world without electricity or indoor plumbing or antibiotics or e-readers or literacy. They got to see God to *that*!

If I got to witness something like *that*, I'd never have doubts or questions again! That would be all I'd need to have a rock-solid relationship with God!

Except... apparently that's not true. Apparently those Big Events, those Spectacular Phenomena aren't enough to ground our relationships with God.

It's totally backward from the way we think - but when we hang our faith on big events, spectacular moments, we actually miss who God is and what God is doing.

We end up with a shallow faith that's riddled with doubts and insecurities.

Which I know is depressing, maybe a little scary. Because that's what we were hoping for this year.

But that's why we're beginning this new year with a series we're calling Ordinary Phenomenon. For the next five weeks, we're going to look at some of the Big Events in the Old Testament - the parting of the Red Sea (today), manna appearing, the fall of Jericho and more. And we'll see that in each of these cases, the Big Event, the marvelous miracle moment, was followed by doubt, complaining and fear.

We'll also see, though, the good news: these big events aren't the end of the story. They're signs that point to God's activity in our ordinary, every day lives. The extraordinary Big Events reveal the God who's working in our ordinary lives. And that ordinary, everyday relationship available to us is the real phenomenon.

The big events are a reminder for us of who God is. They call us to remember so we don't forget. Which would sound silly if it weren't so painfully necessary: we forget all the time. Even the big events.

Take a look with me at what happens in the wake of one of the Big Events we're investigating in this series: the Red Sea crossing. Turn with me in your bibles to Exodus 16. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, Exodus 16 is on page XXX. And if you don't own a bible, we would love for you to take that one with you, keep it as a gift from us.

As you're turning to Exodus 16, let's talk a little about what's happened so far:

God's chosen nation, Israel, has been in slavery in the country of Egypt. The pharaohs there have been exploiting them as cheap labor. Now God has raised up a man named Moses to rescue Israel from their slavery. Moses has confronted the Pharaoh, who refused to free Israel. God has released 10 plagues on Egypt, 10 demonstrations that he is superior to the Egyptian gods. Finally, Pharaoh has relented and released Israel.

So Israel is fleeing Egypt on foot, carrying all their belongings, when Pharaoh changes his mind again and sends his army after Israel, to force them back into slavery. And Israel's flight has taken them to the Red Sea. They're trapped - an ocean on one side, a vastly technologically superior military force on the other.

This is where the Big Event happens. If you've ever seen any movie about Moses, you've seen this scene - whether it was Charlton Heston or that *Prince of Egypt* animated movie a while ago. This is the Parting of the Red Sea.

Moses goes to the edge of the water, raises his hand and God sends a powerful wind over the Sea. And in minutes, the waters part, revealing a dry seabed. The people of Israel hurry across the dry ground, and after they're across, the Egyptians pursue. But God brings the sea crashing in on the Egyptian army, decimating Pharaoh's troops and ensuring Israel's freedom.

It's a massive display of divine power, a Big Event if there ever was one, and it serves in Israel's story to mark the culmination of their founding story: the Exodus. The Red Sea is the grand finale of God's massive act of rescue, of salvation, of God's people from slavery.

This is exactly the sort of "must have been nice" event I always want to see in my own life (duh, right?). I can't help but think: If I had gotten to witness the Red Sea crossing, I'd *never* struggle in my faith again! If I were walking between those walls of water, the seas supernaturally held back (I'd be the guy sticking my hand in the water trying to catch a lobster or something).

Are you kidding me?! This had to have been a world-defining moment for Israel!

Now: let's read what happened just one month later, in Exodus 16, beginning in verse 1:

Then the whole community of Israel set out from Elim and journeyed into the wilderness of Sin, between Elim and Mount Sinai. They arrived there on the fifteenth day of the second month, one month after leaving the land of Egypt. There, too, the whole community of Israel complained about Moses and Aaron. "If only the Lord had killed us back in Egypt," they moaned. "There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death." -- Exodus 16:1-3

Thirty days after walking across the dry bed of the Red Sea, one month after this Big Event, the people are complaining. They're pining for a return to slavery, for death.

One month. That's all it took for them to forget. All it took for the effects of that big event to wane, for their fears and doubts to crowd back in.

Here's what scares me about that: I don't think I'm fundamentally different from the Israelites. I don't think you are, either.

I think humanity is a fickle race. We get caught up in the immediate and forget the big picture. We let the circumstances right in front of us dictate our faith and our behavior.

So when things are good, we're good. But when things aren't so good - when the storms of life inevitably creep in, we get distracted from the bigger picture. We forget that what God has done for us is evidence God is still working, even if we have a hard time seeing him.

Turn over in your bibles to Psalm 77 (again, in our Bibles, it's on page XXX). This is a song from the Ancient Israelite hymnbook that nails our secret angst over the future. This song serves as a template for our own questioning, and it helps us frame what these Big Events are all about. Let's read Psalm 77 together:

I cry out to God; yes, I shout, Oh, that God would listen to me! When I was in deep trouble, I searched for the Lord. All night long I prayed, with hands lifted toward heaven, but my soul was not comforted. I think of God, and I moan, overwhelmed with longing for his help.

You don't let me sleep. I am too distressed even to pray! I think of the good old days, long since ended, when my nights were filled with joyful songs. I search my soul and ponder the difference now. Has the Lord rejected me forever? Will he never again be kind to me? Is his unfailing love gone forever? Have his promises permanently failed? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he slammed the door on his compassion?

The first two verse of the song describe a person we recognize as in that same sort of wilderness period Israel experienced after the Red Sea. The same sort of anguish we all have been through: wondering if God is there, if God can hear us, whether maybe we're actually *rejected* by God in some way.

The songwriter says, Me too! I feel that way too! You're not alone! Let's read what he says next:

And I said, "This is my fate; the Most High has turned his hand against me." But then I recall all you have done, O Lord; I remember your wonderful deeds of long ago. They are constantly in my thoughts. I cannot stop thinking about your mighty works. O God, your ways are holy. Is there any god as mighty as you? You are the God of great wonders! You demonstrate your awesome power among the nations. By your strong arm, you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

When the Red Sea saw you, O God, its waters looked and trembled! The sea quaked to its very depths. The clouds poured down rain; the thunder rumbled in the sky. Your arrows of lightning flashed. Your thunder roared from the whirlwind; the lightning lit up the world! The earth trembled and shook. Your road led through the sea, your pathway through the mighty waters - a pathway no one

knew was there! You led your people along that road like a flock of sheep, with Moses and Aaron as their shepherds. -- Psalm 77

He says, BUT. Even though I feel lost, even though I feel ignored. Even though I feel cursed. BUT I remember what you've done before. I remember those Big Events. How you came through for your people.

I remember. I remember. I remember.

That's where we get everything backwards: We expect big events to comprise the core of our faith. We expect God to do big thing after big thing after big thing in our lives. But that's not how relationships work- marriage, for instance, isn't one honeymoon after another (we even talk about "real" marriage as the relationship after the honeymoon is over). So too with our faith.

The big events point to the God who is active in our every day lives. They remind us that God is faithful, even when we don't see God working. When we look back at them, they point forward at what God is doing right now, what God will be doing tomorrow.

Why did the Psalmist end his song by looking back at the Red Sea? Because that Big Event gave him confidence that God is *not* in fact cursing him. God is *not* silent in his present pain. God *is* doing something big, something new, even if he can't quite see it.

He knows that because God was faithful before, and God's character never changes.

So let's come back to January 5, 2014. Here we are at the cusp of a new year. We're looking ahead, wondering what's next. Some of us are excited. Some of us are anxious. A few of us are frankly terrified.

We've spent a few minutes together looking back 3,500 years or so at something truly miraculous God has done in the history of God's people. In *our* story. Because if we have chosen to follow Jesus, we have become part of God's people, and Israel's story is our story.

Hearing the story of God's rescue at the Red Sea gives us confidence that God is working right now, in 2014, in Beavercreek, OH. What is up to me, what is up to you, is to say Yes to what God is doing. To make ourselves available to God, to be willing to listen for God's voice, inviting us to join in the restoration of all things.

You don't have to wait for a Red Sea miracle, a big event, to say Yes to God. Your life is an ordinary phenomenon, an every day miracle. Your world is filled with people who need love, with opportunities to speak for those who can't speak for themselves, with those who need to see joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control. And God invites you to be that person who will show them who Jesus is, what life looks like.

Remembering Baptism

Today, we have the opportunity to mark this moment. To look back at what God has done for you, to remember who God is so we don't forget in the coming year.

The church has several practices we call Sacraments. Sacraments are rituals, physical symbols in which we experience how God has saved us.

Communion is the sacrament we experience together most regularly, and you'll note this year we will receive communion together more regularly than ever (because we believe it's that important).

But we wanted begin the new year by celebrating the other major sacrament our church recognizes: baptism.

Baptism is a symbol of God's rescue. In the New Testament, it's linked with Jesus' death and resurrection: when we go under the water, we enact Jesus' death, and when we come out of the water, we enact his resurrection. It's a picture that we too have died to our former lives and now live in Jesus' new kingdom.

The New Testament also links baptism with the Red Sea crossing. Look at 1 Corinthians 10:

I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. -- 1 Corinthians 10:1-2

The Red Sea was when Israel crossed from the death of slavery to the life of freedom. So too, baptism is a picture of our crossing from the death of slavery to sin into the freedom Jesus gives us.

So for those of us who follow Jesus, our baptism is a Red Sea moment. It's a picture of our crossing from death into life. A picture that says, I am part of God's people. I am on the path to Life.

Baptism is different from Communion in that we are only baptized once. Whether we were baptized as infants or whether we chose for ourselves to be baptized as teens or adults, baptism isn't a ritual we experience for ourselves more than one time (unlike Communion, which we can receive thousands of times in our lifetime).

But - as we saw in Exodus this morning - when we don't remember, we forget. So we want to mark our baptisms this morning:

explanation of baptism ritual

Nicene Creed

Invitation to Remember Baptism