

Pentecost 16 Sermon September 20, 2020

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As you may have realized by now, I am delighted with the opportunity to delve into the stories of the Jewish Bible or Torah, better known to us as the Old Testament. These are important stories, exciting stories and it is interesting to me that in these stories that are meant to teach the Jewish people their history and the lessons learned from them, there are also lessons for us to learn right alongside of them.

So far, we've moved from the wonderful and colourful story of Joseph in Genesis to the powerful story of Moses in Exodus.

And now, Yahweh has freed the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, and led them into the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of cloud by night. This gave Israel visible assurance of the presence of God in their midst. However, the Egyptians had second thoughts about allowing the Israelites to leave and Pharaoh led his army in full pursuit, to capture them and return them to bondage in Egypt.

They fled in terror complaining to Moses that it would have been better to serve the Egyptians than die in the wilderness. But God stepped in and parted the waters of the Sea and so we found them on the other side of the Red Sea celebrating their freedom from Egypt and Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh.

They travelled on into the wilderness for three days but were unable to find water and so they became very thirsty. When they came to Marah, they finally found water but it was bitter and undrinkable and they complained to Moses saying: "What shall we drink?" Again God stepped up and showed Moses a piece of wood which he threw into the water and the water became sweet and they were able to quench their thirst.

After camping by the springs of these waters, the Israelites rested and regained their strength and prepared for the journey to come. They were gone about a month and found themselves in another battle for survival. The inhospitable environment of what we know as the Sinai Peninsula and southern Israel was described by both the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament as a desert wilderness, a land of chaos and death. It is, of course, to this wilderness that Jesus himself must go one day to endure forty hunger-filled days of temptation and testing by the devil himself.

Long journeys in adverse conditions often bring out the worst in people. This was certainly the case for the newly liberated Israelites. They had run out of provisions and were now so hungry and weary they complained to Moses. "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death."

Forgotten are the years of domination, terror, and enslavement under Pharaoh. All the Israelite community can remember about Egypt is that they had full bellies at the end of the

day. Nostalgic longing for a misremembered history is a powerful and dangerous force, especially in an environment of scarcity and adversity.

And guess what! God stepped in again. He told Moses, “I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day’s portion. But on the sixth day, when they apportion what they have brought in, it shall prove to be double the amount they gather each day. Thus they had food for the Sabbath. That was food for the morning and God also provided meat in the evening when quail appeared and covered the camp.

These people have suffered in Egypt for 400 plus years before God heard their cries and acted to liberate them. They have lived through many trials and tribulations along the way as God continued to act and rescue them. So is it not reasonable to think that they might be just a little bit justified in worrying that this God, with whom they have only recently become acquainted, may not be the most reliable and trustworthy God. .

It had been only over a month since the children of Israel began their journey out of Egypt, and the people are complaining for the third time. Each complaint follows a certain pattern: (1) the people encounter a potentially devastating threat to their well-being (2) they complain (“murmur”) against their leadership; (3) their human leaders bring the complaint before God; and (4) God saves them by various means -- the miraculous crossing of the sea, providing drinkable water, and, in this narrative, providing bread from heaven.

Is this story merely trying to tell us that these Israelites are a bunch of no-good complainers and that this is just the beginning of God's trouble with them?

I think this is a story that almost tenderly describes the growing relationship between the children of Israel and their God.

In this passage, God acknowledges not only the Israelites' need for assurance but also God's desire to shape them as a different kind of people, a different kind of community. In the ritual practice of daily gathering of food that falls from the sky, they will learn, with their very bodies, to come to trust their god; they will learn to share their basic human resources equitably.

God’s test of Israel is not so much a matter of determining whether they properly follow the instruction manual. More to the point is whether they will truly trust that the heavenly bread will also be daily bread. This point is underscored by the fact that the first reported violation is a case of hoarding: “However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them”. In this context hoarding is a sign of distrust, and the grumbling of the Israelites is a symptom of their lack of trust in their God.

The gathering of manna in the wilderness -- with specific amounts brought in on certain days -- creates a structure in the people’s lives that is a reliable constant in the turmoil of their wilderness wandering. Although the reader is not yet aware that this journey to their new land will take forty years, the narrator notes that this provision of manna every single day, lasts

the entirety of the trip. Order is thus established in the midst of chaos by means of this rhythm of divine provision

Perhaps God created us with a need for daily food as a reminder, over and over, that God is providing for our needs. In our home, we say grace at every meal, in part to express our thanks to God for providing for our needs, and in part to remind ourselves that the food which we could so easily take for granted is, in fact, a blessing from God—a daily blessing—a thrice-daily blessing.

In verses 2-3, the people claimed to long for Egypt and its bounty, but what Egypt really represented was a complete lack of rest with a pharaoh who cared nothing for their well-being or their needs. Here, bread and rest -- on the Sabbath -- are provided generously and reliably

And the keeping of the Sabbath will remind them that they are human beings who, like their god, require rest and rejuvenation. Even in crisis, with chaos all around, Sabbath practice is essential to their lives and their emerging identities

This story gives the wonderful promise of God's provision, which is reassuring to all of us. It also might serve as a guide for when we're in stressful times to let the rhythms of religious observance -- daily prayer and weekly worship, for example -- bring order to the chaos and uncertainty around us.

Besides trust, there is another lesson that God seems intent upon teaching: the God of Israel hears prayers. The point is made several times throughout the text, Moses said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, *because he has heard your grumbling against him*' .

“Moses also said, ‘You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, *because he has heard your grumbling against him*’”

Moses told Aaron, “Say to the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the LORD, for *he has heard your grumbling.*’” And finally, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘*I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Know that I am the LORD your God.*’”

Israel's future identity as a covenant people depends upon their recognizing that Yhwh is a God who hears and answers prayers. When they pray, heaven responds. When they groan under the crushing weight of the world, that groan reaches the throne of God.

An important lesson from the wilderness is that Israel does not travel alone, and neither do we. The God of the desert is a gift-giving, life-sustaining, and prayer-hearing God.

At times in all of our lives we have walked in the wilderness. As we seemingly now are moving into the second wave of this pandemic, when the temperatures are dropping and darkness is setting in earlier, we are headed into another kind of wilderness. May we remember in the days to come, that our God, the God of Israel, also travels with us and is the same gift-giving, life-sustaining, and prayer-hearing God.