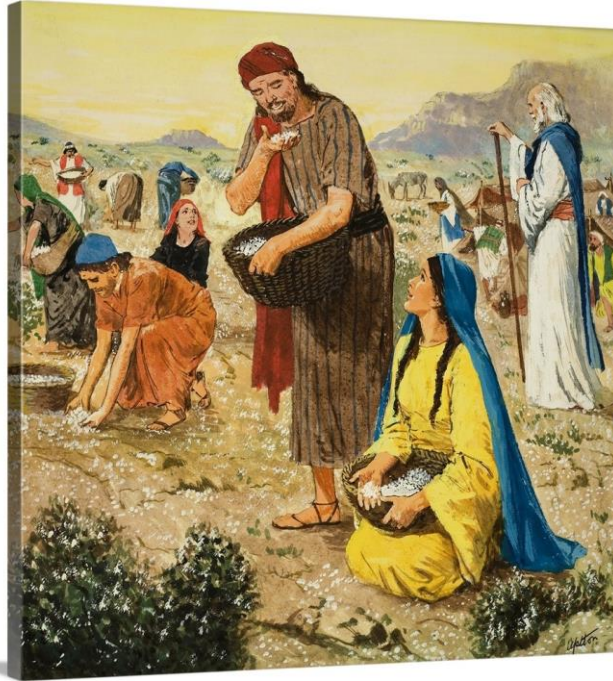


MOSES AND THE WILDERNESS

The Whiny Hebrews In The Wilderness



Exodus 16:2 "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you (Moses) have brought us out (here) into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'"

For the last many weeks now, perhaps too many, I have been preaching on the story of Moses and the Exodus. And I promise that this will be the last time for a while. Even so, for the next several weeks, the stories may change, but the theme is the same; a theme that arose in last week's story and sermon. Last week, the

Hebrews were encamped by a sea of reeds after having escaped their slavery in Egypt, following the Ten Great Plagues and especially that last night when the angel of death had 'passed over' the houses of the Hebrews, and striking down instead the Egyptian children, but not them. So now freed from their slavery and camped beside a sea of reeds, a shallow body of water with reeds growing out of the seabed, the Hebrews turned and saw that the Pharaoh and his chariots were in hot pursuit and drawing nigh. So what did those Hebrews do then? How did they respond to this unexpected development? Did they fall upon their knees praying to the God who had rescued them from the Night of Passover? Did they fall upon their knees beseeching further protection and aid from the God who had freed them from slavery in Egypt? No, they did not do that. Instead the Hebrew people turned to Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and complained bitterly, as they will do again and again and again in the readings for the next several weeks. It started last week, when Pharaoh's chariots drew near, and the Hebrews cried out to Moses: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? . . . For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians (as slaves) than to die in the wilderness." But Moses said to the people last week, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom

you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

Then that strong east wind blew all through the night, and the wind turned the sea of reeds into dry land by morning, whereupon the Israelites could cross on foot. Meanwhile the Egyptians pursued and went into the sea bed after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers, and the waters that had been blown back by the hard east wind all night, we are told, returned to their normal depth that morning and the chariot wheels of the Egyptians became 'clogged' in the sea of reeds, according to the Scriptures, so that the wheels turned with difficulty. The Egyptians were stuck in the mud, and some of Pharaoh's men were drowned. And eventually the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for (their) Lord is fighting for them against Egypt," that same God who was thought by the Egyptians to have wrought the Ten Great Plaques that had devastated the people in Egypt, and so Pharaoh's army turned back. And thus God delivered the Hebrew people once again.

Then Moses ordered the people to set out from there, from the sea of reeds into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the desert but they found no water. At last they came to waters of Marah, but they could not drink the waters there because it was bitter. So what did the Hebrews do? They complained again to Moses, saying, "(Moses) What shall we drink?" This water here is too bitter? And so, Moses instructed by the Lord threw a certain kind of

tree into the water, and the water became sweet, and the Hebrews drank. And thus God delivered the Hebrew people once again.

Then the whole congregation of the Hebrews then moved further into the wilderness towards Mount Horeb, where Moses had first encountered the burning bush, where the people wanted to make a sacrifice to the God who had rescued them. And so now in today's reading, the Hebrews were hungry and they had no bread, and no meat, and what did they do? They complained again to Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Hebrews said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

So what happened? God rained down bread from heaven, so that the Hebrews had food to eat. For in the morning, there was a layer of thick dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Hebrews saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" or in Hebrew "manna." Did that satisfy them though? No, soon they complained that they wanted meat to eat. So that evening quails came up and covered the camp; and the Hebrews captured the quails for meat. And so the Hebrews had a regular supply of meat in the evenings and bread that fell from the heavens in the mornings to feed them. And thus God delivered the Hebrew people once again.

In next week's reading, the Hebrews will continue their journey until they camp at Rephidim, but again there was no water for the people to drink. The Hebrews, we are told, quarreled again with Moses, and said, "(Moses, we have no water.) Give us water to drink." And so Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me," he said. The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and . . . take in your hand the staff with you . . . I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And thus God delivered the Hebrew people once again. And Moses called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

So was the Lord among them or not? How on earth could these people doubt whether the Lord God was with them or not? Having rescued them from slavery in Egypt with mighty signs and powers, having saved them from death on the night of Passover, having furthered their escape at the sea of reeds when they crossed over on foot, but where the Egyptian chariots got clogged in the mud and

drowned, having provided them meat and then manna from heaven, and water at Marah and again at Massah and Meribah? How could they possibly doubt whether the Lord was among them? How they could possibly complaint bitterly to Moses and Aaron, and threaten to stone them? As I said last week, this is one bunch of whiny Hebrews, who seem never satisfied with what they have, always wanting more, always thinking it was better in the past by those fleshpots in Egypt, never confident about the future, never content, never trusting in their God to preserve them.

Thank God we are not like them, like those whiny Hebrews! Thank God that we do not complain about our situation, that we are not constantly demanding more and more from God, lamenting the 'good ole' days, doubting whether God was really on our side or not, living in fear, and not trusting that God would provide for us. Thank God we are not like that! Or are we?

Years later, years after the Exodus was ended, and the Promised Land secured, those Israelites would look back upon the Exodus as THE single most important defining moment for them as a people. The wilderness in retrospect was not so bad; in fact, it was good for them; it is what brought them all together as a people. It was in the wilderness that the nation of Israel was formed. And the later prophets of the Israelites will repeatedly call the Israelites back to the faith which they had during the time of the Exodus; when they had to rely upon God for their needs, when they had to rely upon God

to escape from slavery, or to find bread, or meat or water. The later prophets of the Israelites will recall the wilderness experience as the only time when the people of Israel depended solely upon God for their sustenance and as a time when God sustained them, with water from the rocks at Meribah when they were thirsty, and with manna from heaven when they were hungry.

And so Jesus will go off into the wilderness before beginning his public ministry, trusting in God to sustain him. And every Lent every one of us is called upon to re-enter that wilderness experience and trust in God, to trust that God has given us sufficient for our needs and that God will sustain us. Do we believe that? Is the Lord among us or not? Especially in the this time of pandemic, do we trust in the Lord or do we simply long for the good-ole days, do we simply long for a return to 'normalcy' in the midst of age of self-quarantine and masks and physical spacing? When are we going back to what things like before, we ask, repeatedly.

Let us here and now affirm our belief in God, that we are blessed. That God is with us in the time of pandemic, a time when most of us are just mildly inconvenienced, when so many others are suffering and dying, when so many others are losing their jobs, waiting in bread lines, wearily sending their kids back to school, and worried about the future. Let us here and now affirm our belief in God, that the Lord is with us. Let us thank God for the blessings of our life, and trust in him. Let us rejoice and be glad. For I

tell you that again and again in our lives, God has heard our cries
as he hear the cries of the ancient Hebrews, and again and again God
has given us what we need, so that we need never ever be afraid
again. AMEN.