

SOME DO and SOME DON'T

The story, or at least the sentiment, appears more than once in scripture, and there is a specific reason it appears periodically throughout the lectionary cycle. We last heard a version of the tale in the heat of summer, recounted (literally) from Numbers, the book so-named because it reflects the first official census taken of Israel. Today it appears in Exodus, amid a people and a community under duress and on the move, struggling and uncertain, fatigued and tense. The story arrives at an especially anxious time – for Moses and the Israelites, but of course, also an anxious time for us.

Either way, whatever year, the language is familiar, the feelings are identical, the circumstances essentially unchanged: "*Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock?*" Put more bluntly: "*Why have you brought us to die in the wilderness?*" [Num. 21:5ff] And if that dissension is not enough, there is specific complaint about the provisions as well: "*there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.*"; "*Give us water to drink.*" In perhaps the most familiar rendering of the overall story we hear this: "*Would that 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 the whole assembly with hunger.*" [Ex 16:3]. Really? Is that why Moses has forsaken both family and familiarity, and answered an irrational summons, well into the golden years of his pretty good life? Is that really what the leader is up to? Poor Moses. The reluctant, stuttering, doubting chief cannot catch a break. We are told that "*the people became impatient on the way.*" Still, as scripture records, this is a monumental time and place, because here again, the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "*Is the LORD among us or not?*" [Ex. 17:7] And there is no more searing, intense, painful and soul-searching question than that when people are in a time of anxiety, fear, or profound uncertainty.

As the Bible reminds us, there is eventually relief in the form of manna, and there is eventually water from the stone, yet the peculiar and ongoing spiritual “test” is that the people must prepare, search and be ready not once but every day, for this occurrence, for this faith challenge. They are fed, saved if you will, one day at a time. But what will the next challenge, the next dilemma, the next infection of doubt, bring? Indeed, the circularity of the story itself, the “never finished-ness” of the interaction between God and us, the very necessity of a daily devotion, lies deep at the heart of this story. God saves not once, but over and over again; similarly, as we have seen and shall see, the people rebel and lose heart, not once but over and over again. And then their wavering faith is restored, over and over again. This is an ancient dynamic in the earliest tales of spiritual liberation and freedom. Like many other biblical parables and histories, this is a tale of testing, unrest, distrust, irritation, anger, frustration, anxiety and scapegoating, all unfolding in the ‘here and now’. Simply by standing back and observing the ebb and flow of the people and their bargaining with God, we learn a great deal not only about them but we also learn a great deal about ourselves.

Since the beginning of recorded time there have always been those who, for lack of a better term, have opted against life and against transformation. There have always been those who have decided to remain stuck and to die. There have always been those for whom the proverbial grass was and is greener elsewhere - some other time, some delusionally nostalgic “golden age”, some full stew pot and safe haven, removed from the daily demands and concerns of an anxious age. There have always been those who openly chose slavery over freedom, indenture instead of emancipation. Read again of that bitter lament of the vision-less Israelites as they become their own worst enemies, abdicate faith in God, and make the prideful and arrogant assumption that they and they alone know the truth and indeed the way. It is not until the serpents appear that they really begin to reconsider.

Think about it: Have the people really been brought - have we, you and I, really been brought - by God to the wilderness to starve, to die, to perish, to be forsaken or to be killed? Might it not actually be the case, as I have said throughout the year, that the wilderness is, in fact, the very place, the very locus, the very epicenter of God's mighty redemption and the offering of God's new life? Jesus and the Devil, Moses and the Israelites, our present age and a fearful society? Might it not be, as I have said throughout these weeks of Lent, that such geographies of desolation, such fierce landscapes, now as then, are just as much emotional and spiritual as they are literal and physical? Or more likely, some mix of all of it?

In the grand scope of God's handiwork, consider those during the time of return from Babylonian Exile, coming back in wave upon wave under the benevolence and guidance of Sheshbazzar, Jeshua, Zerubabel and Artaxerxes; coming "home" to rebuild the temple and to restore the mantle of God in a broken land. Yet even there, in that great and timeless moment when Ezra reads the Torah scroll by the Water Gate, and the incomprehensible, saving grace of God is made so abundantly clear, scripture and history remind us that there were those who opted to stay behind, those who chose the "known" of slavery versus the "unseen" (if you will) of faith. Even as the people *"sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord"* [Ezra 3:11] amid the sound of trumpets and cymbals while the cornerstone is set in place, there are yet those who could not accept and will not receive the greatness of God's mysterious glory as revealed in a transforming faith which makes all things new, brings all things alive, restores all things to truth and wholeness. Even after generations of bitter exile and captivity, even after Darius and Cyrus invite the exiles back and offer new life, new vision, a new way, new hope, new possibility, even funds and resources to rebuild the temple itself, some refuse. They will not partake. The Psalmist reminds us that in the wilderness "[God] gave them what they craved", yet even then, *"some were fools and took to rebellious ways..."* [Psalm 107:17]. We are reminded then, as we are reminded now, that there have always been

those who stayed behind, defied restoration, preferred bondage, and were identified with misery. There have always been people and communities and family members and co-workers -- you know them and I know them -- whose persona and identity, whose very being and demeanor, is defined by this aura of pessimism, resistance, spiritual inertia and a distorted understanding of self at the expense of a celestial vision of God and an unconditional embrace of hope. There were always those who craved a way back, instead of marshalling the courage and the faith for a way forward.

We are given choices in this life of faith and during this journey upon which we have embarked. Throughout his mystical and soaring Gospel, John consistently juxtaposes "light" and "darkness", and John forever reminds us that there is but one true option. Even if people "*loved darkness rather than light*", the fact remains, as we have heard so many times, that God sent Christ not "*to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved.*" **[John 3:17]** Today we witness our God in the form of water and miracles, but God shall appear in countless ways to a myriad of people, across the long arc of redemptive time. That salvation, while a free gift and available to all, nonetheless requires an active acceptance and a real participation on our part. The giving of that manna or that bread or that cool, soothing water requires that we are open to receiving it, and not simply to expect it. To be grateful, and not merely greedy. That is a significant spiritual leap. At the moment, what is painfully absent from among the Israelites is any sense of appreciation. It is a wonder that God keeps offering sustenance at all to a people so obstinate. And thus the reality is that we simply do not have the luxury or the option of just sitting back and letting it all simply unfold around us. We actually have to do something.

"*We are*", as Paul writes from prison to the people in Ephesus, "*what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works.*" **[Eph. 2:10]** But to get there, to take up that mantle of responsibility, to take up The Cross, is to overcome fear, to dispel anxiety, and to crush arrogance. It is to genuinely believe in

something, some future, some way of life bigger and more wondrous and far more enduring than ourselves. It is to live fully into that promise, to take risk, seek the new, believe in tomorrow, and know deep in our hearts that this thing we call "The Kingdom" is not some chimeric myth or opiated Emerald City but the real, living and breathing embodiment of justice and equity and harmony and peace and spirit.

In the end, at least for now, Paul brings us back to ourselves, and he leaves us with our assignment not only for today but for all the days to come: *"But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."* [Eph. 4:16]

May it be so. Because love will always win.

~ **Amen.**