

17th Sunday after Pentecost

“Life is not a Carnival”

1 October 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Exodus 17:1-7

“The Promised Land always lies on the other side of a Wilderness”

Havelock Ellis (1859 - 1939)

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Hear the lesson for 17th Sunday after Pentecost. Our sermons have concentrated on the Hebrew scriptures this summer and fall:

[17:1] From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. [2] The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” [3] 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?”

[4] So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” [5] The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. [6] 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. [7] He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not” (EX 17:1-7).

Rather than detail all Exodus 17’s bits and pieces, may we attend to the wilderness wandering. We could in fact understand any season of faith—modern or ancient—as an exploration of wilderness wandering. We might ask: “Where are we now; and where are we headed? Where is God?”

Do you remember a news story a few years ago about the cruise ship Carnival Splendor that had a fire? The passengers endured three days of cold food, foul toilets, and dark cabins. Imagine being with nearly 4,500 passengers and crew members who expected a honeymoon-like cruise. Instead they received something just this side of a Titanic-type voyage. Many of the passengers said the worst part of the nightmare was darkness. For a newlywed couple, the cruise was their honeymoon. The bride groused: “It’s dark, it’s cold, and the food is terrible. It’s not what we planned.” The Carnival Cruise Line offered a refund to all passengers and a free future cruise.

Those on the wilderness road with Moses and the cruise passengers had in common a phrase that each could have said with brutal honesty: “It’s not what we planned.” For generations, the children of Israel implored God for rescue from Egypt. At last, in Moses, God called his people out of Egypt as Moses bids Pharaoh to “Let my people go.” Free from slavery God now tests the Israelites’ faith as their provider and ruler in the wilderness. Earlier, at Marah, the people had water but it was bitter; here at “Rephidim,” an oasis in the Negev/Sinai, there is no water at all; the well has run dry.

The writer paints the Israelites as so unsympathetic that the Hebrew word translated “quarreled” is a legal term. They sue Moses. But to Moses, it is as if the people take God to court. Not only do they doubt that God can feed them, but in the desert, they doubt God can provide even water.

God simply grants the people's request, doing so without rebuke. God directs Moses to the "rock at Horeb" and using the same staff Moses used to poison the Nile earlier, he strikes the rock and water comes out. In giving manna, bread from heaven, and now water from the rock, God shows mastery over creation.

Yet in this small victory in the forty-year sojourn Exodus reminds us of something that John Lennon once said with keen insight: "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." The people's feeling in the wilderness is this is not a cruise, life is not a carnival, and "It's not what we planned." Perhaps they really wanted out of Egypt, but this is not what they wanted into! This is a Bible lesson that makes most folks like us feel empathy for Moses. Novelist and theologian, Frederick Buechner, writes:

Whenever Hollywood cranks out a movie about him, they always give the part to someone like Charlton Heston with some fake whiskers glued on. The truth of it is he probably looked a lot more like Tevye the milkman after ten rounds with Mohammed Ali" [or Mike Tyson or Jake LaMotta] (*Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*, Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1979, p. 110).

Moses might have said, in his own words, something like this:

I led the Israelites, kicking and screaming, into the wilderness. One would have thought they would be grateful to escape the shackles of slavery! Yet these malcontents complained constantly. "We're starving," they murmured, and the Lord sent manna and quail to appease their hunger. "We're dying of thirst. Why did we ever leave Egypt?" they grumbled, and the Lord provided water from the rock. I named this place Massah (test) and Meribah (quarrel) because they Israelites tested and quarreled with the Lord. Yet, I was not innocent at Meribah. I struck the rock too hard with my staff, showing a lack of confidence in the Lord's power (Bob Walker, *Encounters with the Living God: Old Testament Characters Tell Their Own Stories*, Abingdon, Nashville, 2000, p. 50).

Moses had it pretty rough. He had been the Lord's leader to bring Israel out of bondage. And when the going got tough, the people let Moses have it. They complained and murmured against him. Yet perhaps we are too harsh in our assessment of these people. After all: did they really have full disclosure about what they were getting into? When they cried out "It's not what we planned" can we discount the truth of that statement? Most of the time most of the things we live through we could say: "It's not what we planned" and we would be right. Sometimes there is a place for complaint and murmuring—but only within a specific context—which reminds me of a story:

A man seeking a deepened spiritual life joined a monastic order of extreme silence. In fact, the members could speak only two words every five years. In the first meeting with the abbot after five years, the man was invited to speak and said, "Bed hard."

After the second five-year period, the meeting with the abbot was repeated. When given permission to speak the man said, "Food bad." Another five years passed and in the review with the abbot the man said, "I quit."

The abbot looked at him for several moments and then replied, "I'm not surprised. All you have done since you arrived is complain."

Sometimes it is okay to complain, but we do so in a larger context of faith. On our faith journey we are complaining, maligning, human creatures who worship a God that remembers our need more that

we remember God's providence. We are quick to complain or murmur when things do not go our way, but extremely slow to praise God when things do go our way.

Yet despite the way we humans do business, we would do well to remember during our faith journey that not only does God rule and overrule, but God also provides for us—even when we think we are in God-forsaken places. And just because "It's not what we planned" doesn't mean God isn't in our experience one place or another.

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