“Through Heaven’s Eyes: Wanderers on the Way”

The Rev. Katie Day

September 20, 2020

Exodus 16:2-15 & 17:1-7

I want to start off by saying the Israelites were not bad people. These texts paint them in a certain light, but they weren’t bad people. Everyone gets hangry, right? Everyone gets cranky when they’re dehydrated. Everyone longs for when things felt more familiar – that old expression about the devil you know or the devil you don’t?

Many of us choose the devil we know, and here we have a group of people who had been dominated, enslaved, abused longing for their familiar lives,

despite the terrible circumstances in which they lived.

Life in Egypt was terrible, and the people longed to be free, and God, remembering the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah, the covenant in which God promised to be their God and the God of their descendants, God made good on that covenant and freed them, promising to deliver them from Pharaoh’s hand into the Promised Land, a land of their own. After centuries, the Israelites are finally free.

And not even 2 months into freedom, here they are complaining about food, in the passage John read. “You brought us here to kill us! We should have died in Egypt – at least then we’d have had enough to eat!” The Israelites had left their predictable life – how easily did they seem to forget the realities of slavery, and focused only on the fact that they ate regularly back then.

Now their lives seem unpredictable, and scary, they don’t know what each day will bring, where they will sleep, how far they will have to journey. They aren’t even entirely sure who this God is who has freed them, perhaps they really have been brought here by Moses to die of starvation and exposure. It’s a legitimate concern. And in the passage I read, this time it isn’t food they lack, it’s water. When they camped at Rephidim, there was no water. They were THIRSTY. Of course they were thirsty.

But it was a thirst for more than just water. They were thirsty for reassurance. They needed to know, in the midst of all else unknown, that they would be cared for at the most basic level. The last line of the story I read is the heart of the matter, the question the people asked in the midst of their wandering: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

It’s easy for us to hear of their complaining and laugh about it, “Oh you Israelites, be grateful for your freedom! Have a little faith! We know the whole story, we know how it ends, with wandering in the wilderness, yes, with manna, with water from a rock, with promises fulfilled, with a land of their own. But those faithful and terrified people in these early days of their wilderness wanderings – I imagine them at loose ends crying out in frustration to God, to Moses, to Aaron or anyone who would listen. They were utterly disoriented, out of sorts in unfamiliar territory.

Have you ever felt that way? Finally getting settled in a place and then receiving military orders – on to the next new thing, new place, new people, a new life. Saving and planning for retirement, and then waking up with no obligation to be anywhere or do anything after a lifetime of working, unsure suddenly of how to fill your hours, days, weeks… Leaving the hospital after a surgery and facing a new world of rehab, limited mobility, and dependence upon others as you heal.

The Israelites longed for their basic needs to be met, and beyond that, they longed for the reassurance of God’s presence. On one hand, it seems odd,

ridiculous even, for the Israelites, of all people, to question God’s presence.

Have they forgotten that the living God freed them from the cruel hand of Pharaoh? Have they forgotten the plagues and the Passover? Have they forgotten the pillar of cloud and fire?

But they were enslaved much longer than they’ve been free, and some chains are far more difficult to break. When you’re suffering in a system of oppression, you know where you stand. There is no question. But when you’re free…who’s in charge? The Israelites are naturally looking for a leader, and Moses, who God called and deputized to serve as God’s own hands and feet and mouthpiece on this journey, and for the most part, Moses looks and acts just like a regular guy most of the time.

So *how* do they know God is with them? I wonder if they fall into the trap that many of us today also fall into: we associate God’s presence with feeling “blessed” – when we have what we need, we seem to more easily attribute that comfort, that peace, that satisfaction to God.

Walking through the sea on dry land? God is present. Magical manna from the sky? God is present. Water from a rock? God is present. Money in the bank? God is present. Great relationships? God is present. Had a good day? God is present. Saw a gorgeous rainbow and felt happy? God is present.

It’s relatively easy, for modern people of faith, to find God in the positives.

But what about in the wilderness? What about when you are tired and hungry for anything other than manna, AGAIN, and you are thirsty and THERE IS NO WATER, there just ISN’T any? What about when you give up everything to try something new and you thought it would be a nice change but now you aren’t so sure and maybe your old life wasn’t so bad, because at least you didn’t have to eat manna every day?

What about when you have to make a lifestyle change, and you know it will be better for your health in the long run, but suddenly you don’t know how to fill your time, or how to relax, because drinking or smoking or eating junk or being a couch potato used to take up some much time and now the days are looming, empty? What about when you are lonely, and scared, and maybe lost, and sad, and anxious, and there’s a pandemic with no end in sight, and your mask hurts your ears, and you miss eating in restaurants and going to movies and being in crowds? Where is God then? Not always as easy to see.

We *know*, of course, that God *is* present.

God had promised the Israelites: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. I will bring you into the land I swore to give Abraham.”

And God promised the rest of us, through Jesus: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” God is present. We know this.

But in the moment, in the wilderness, it’s hard to know. We’re hungry;

we’re so thirsty. For reassurance, guidance, compassion. I imagine we are much like the Israelites. We can turn on any faucet here and quench our thirst for water, but we, too, thousands of years later, thirst for reassurance, guidance, compassion, for the knowledge that we are not alone on our journeys through the unknown wilderness. When we grumble and complain, perhaps that is the thirst that is truly at the root of our complaints.

That’s what the Israelites had to learn: that God’s presence wasn’t dependent upon their full bellies; God was present in the fullness and in the hunger, too. When Moses struck that rock, God was already standing right on top of it, before even one drop of water poured out. They were learning to trust God, and to trust God’s promises.

Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, mystic, writer, and theologian claims that in the Israelites’ 40-year journey through the desert, (which would have taken just a few months if they’d gone directly across), the point wasn’t to get to the other side. Rather, the point was for them to learn to love God. (Merton)

The entire book of Exodus is the story of God’s faithfulness & graciousness – and this story in particular bears witness to the nature of life in relationship with God. People are needy – people get hungry and thirsty. God is patient, and responds to their human need graciously. In fact, God not only meets their physical need at Rephidim by sending the water when there was none, God does so in a way that restores community - by having Moses strike the rock, the people who were angry with him and frustrated became grateful once again, and experienced God’s presence through him.

And when we meet someone who is in a hungry, thirsty, grumbly place,

perhaps we can show them, through our actions, that God is present, indeed. We can be that for one another – we can offer our selves in relationship, so that God’s presence may be more clearly felt.

There is a folk song I love, written by Chuck Brodsky, but I heard it first from David Lamotte. It goes like this:

We are each other's angels and we meet when it is time;

We keep each other going and we show each other signs;

Thank you for the water; I thought I was gonna die out here in the desert; But you quenched my thirst. Let's break a little bread together; I've got a little manna. It was a gift from somebody who was passing by and offered me a lift We are each other's angels and we meet when it is time. We keep each other going and we show each other signs.

“Is the Lord among us or not?” Look around. Wherever you see people hungry and thirsty for manna, for water, for justice, for freedom, for comfort, for kindness, for human contact. Wherever you see people building relationships, offering reassurance on the wilderness road, guidance for the journey, compassion – a cup of cold water and a listening ear, God is present.

God *is* present. Amen.

# Works Cited

Lamotte, David. "We Are Each Other's Angels." *Flying: Live from the Grey Eagle*. By Chuck Brodsky. Black Mountain, NC, 1994. Compact Disc.

Merton, Thomas. *Thomas Merton*. Templegate Publisher, 1990.