

October 1, 2023
“Expecting the Unexpected”
Exodus 17:1-7 / Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Pastor Tim

If you were around last Sunday, you'll recognize the circumstances, and the tone, in our reading from Exodus. A story, by the way, also found in the Book of Numbers, chapter 20. With some notable differences and more severe consequences.

For our purposes, the Israelites are still in the wilderness. Still only at the beginning of what will famously be a 40-year-journey to the so-called “promised land.”

Fresh off their escape from the shackles of Egypt, their miraculous pass through the miraculously parted Red Sea, their celebration of new-found liberation with the songs of Moses and Miriam, their praise of what the Psalmist calls God's “wonders” and “marvels,” they pick up where they and we left off last week.

Complaining. Quarreling with Moses, this time for lack of water to drink, not lack of food to eat.

The lesson of manna and quail, as we explored last Sunday, of God's promise and provision of enough for all, has not yet sunk in.

“Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” The lament of the Psalmist echoes: “How long, O Lord? How long?”

The account from Numbers, which lacks the story of manna and quail, throws everything into their complaint: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us into this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink.”

It's worth noting here that this is not even the first time the Israelites complained about lack of water in the wilderness. Immediately following their Red Sea adventure, just three days into wilderness, there is no water to drink.

Well, in fact, there was water – it was just too bitter to drink. The people complain, as we all would. Because you know, if you don't drink water for THREE days, you could die.

In this story, God shows Moses a piece of wood, which Moses promptly throws into the water. And just like that, the water turns from bitter to sweet. From unexpected to expected.

And just like that, the Israelites find themselves in Elim, with its bountiful springs of water and palm trees to provide shade. A temporary bit of oasis paradise in the midst of desert wilderness.

So that experience is presumably fresh in their minds, but it's their bodies that inspire the complaining. Insecurity and anxiety prevail; shackles of another kind. And no less debilitating.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness, or on the verge of wilderness, insecurity and anxiety often prevail. Fear creeps in. Fear takes the wheel again.

When people are struggling for mere survival, insecurity and anxiety and fear are understandable. It's important, here, that we not trivialize human suffering or the desperation that comes when you are literally thirsty and hungry. Beyond thirst and hunger. With no relief in sight. With no relief within your control.

Faith alone is not enough to quench thirst and satisfy hunger. Or clothe the naked, or house the homeless, or release the captives. Prophets, all the way up to and beyond Jesus, make that clear.

But faith is an essential starting place if we are to tap into the divine imagination. The divine promise and provision, within the gift of Creation, of enough for all.

As Dr. King famously wrote in describing the long road to freedom and justice, "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

Faith is at the heart of this story. And faith, not understood as intellectual assent, but simply trust. Trust. Trust.

As D. Elton Trueblood suggests, "Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation."

And you know, trust takes time to build. It's easy to point fingers at the Israelites for their lack of faith, but that's never the point of the story. Never.

We are the Israelites. We are the ones still learning to trust, STILL learning to trust more fully, to trust FULLY, in God's promise and provision. Enough for us and enough for all.

Insecurity, anxiety, fear are both causes and symptoms of faithlessness. Lack of trust. They feed off each other. Lack of trust fuels insecurity, anxiety, fear; and insecurity, anxiety and fear erode trust. Faith.

God created, and is yet still creating, a world of enough for all. A world of blessing.

But in our insecurity, our anxiety, our fear, we have collectively created and are still creating a world of scarcity. Today's blessing for ALL withheld, hoarded, because we are afraid that there will not be enough blessing for US, for OURS, tomorrow.

Where there is no insecurity, no anxiety, no fear, trust grows. And where there is full trust, unwavering faith, there is no longer insecurity. Anxiety. Fear.

That is the deeper lesson of manna and quail. And that is the lesson of water from the rock. Trust me, God says, again and again and again. Trust me. Expect even the unexpected.

As THIS story goes, Moses again takes the people's complaining to God. Under threat of mutiny, he doesn't know what to do. To lead others through wilderness, remember, is to be in wilderness yourself.

And what comes next, in God's response, is yet more of the unexpected: "Take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 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."

And it does, and they do. The Psalmist says that "God made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers." But water does not come from rocks. Maybe over and around rocks, but not FROM rocks. Right?

But again, that's the lesson. Where there is faith, trust, we can begin to rethink what is possible. We can tap into the divine imagination. We can open ourselves to expecting even the unexpected, to way emerging out of no way. To lands of milk and honey out of wilderness.

And where there is trust, faith, there CAN be hope. And where there IS hope, there WILL be love. And where there IS love, not only is there NO fear, but there MUST be justice, love in action – so say the prophets, all the way up to and beyond Jesus. So says God.

Justice, in fact, not righteousness, is the fullest expression of faith. In the wilderness places of our lives and in the wilderness places around our world, faith is always the first step. But again, faith alone will not quench thirst and satisfy hunger. Only from faith to hope to love to JUSTICE will people hunger and thirst no more. Will the naked be clothed. Will the homeless be housed. Will the captives be set free.

There is, indeed, enough for all. God, in Creation, has already made sure of it. That is the point of this story. That is the point of these Exodus wilderness stories.

So may we trust, again and again, in God's promise and provision. May we cast our insecurities and anxieties and fears aside to tap into the divine imagination. Manna from heaven, water from a rock – of all places. Enough blessing for today. Enough blessing for all.

May we find our individual and collective way back to expecting even the unexpected.

And may it be so.