

A Lectionary 25 9.24.23

Exodus 16:2-15

Focus Statement: God looks forward

Well, we're in the wilderness again, still, and the wilderness continues to be a desolate and dangerous place for the Israelites. Last week we read about how they danced on the seashore, having just seen their enemies buried by the waves. What was last week for us was about six weeks ago for them, now verse one tells us they are in the Wilderness of Sin, which best I can tell is somewhere in the northern Arabian Peninsula. It's hot, it's dry, it's desolate, and there is no food. Like last week we have the Israelites complaining about a very valid concern but doing so in the most melodramatic way possible. "If only we had died by the hands 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." Again, like last week with the fast-approaching Egyptian army, not having any food is a valid concern. They could die in the wilderness without food. But, I will also say, the Israelites are engaging in a bit of magical thinking here, when they wax poetic about the days when they "sat by the fleshpots and ate [their] fill of bread." Remember what was happening in Egypt, when God "observed the misery of [God's] people... heard their cry on account of their taskmasters... knew their suffering," and sent Moses to bring them out of Egypt. The Israelites weren't sitting around enjoying ample buffets of food. They were slaves, forced to work long hours building storehouses for Pharaoh's excessive wealth, of which they could partake only enough to keep them upright, and often not even that, while Pharaoh systematically killed them off through starvation, forced labor, violence, and straight up infanticide. This was not a good situation they were in, there is a reason God heard their cries, they had real things to cry to God about.

The thing the Israelites did here was not some sign of their incredible short-sighted naivete, it's actually a super common feature of being human. The psychological term for this is "rosy retrospection," it's the tendency to all things being equal, recall the past more fondly than the present. The reason we do this has to do with the way our brains processes memory. When something happens in our lives, our brains over time forget or overlook the negative or neutral parts of the event, leaving us with more positive memories. I was listening to a Hidden Brain podcast episode a few weeks ago that talked about how "this is exactly what all human beings need to do. We need to remember the kinds of things that we went through, and we want to tell ourselves stories about the kind of people we are and how we became this way... we're necessarily completely fabricating memories so much as we're selecting and kind of weaving these different memories into a meaningful self-narrative that helps us make some sense of our lives and our connection to others."

The good thing about rosy recollection is that it helps us process and deal with trauma. Our brains are set up to move through the bad parts and focus on the good, so we don't get trapped in cycles of pain and suffering. The bad thing is exactly what happened with the Israelites, who were willing to forego this promise of future freedom, of a land flowing with milk and honey, in exchange for their memories of what they had left behind. We can remember so fondly a past that wasn't quite as we remember it, that it can make us long for what was behind and fear what lies ahead, even when what lies ahead holds so much promise.

But this is God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, who saved them from the Egyptians, and who is leading them forward to this uncertain future. And God isn't going to let them wander back to where they were. Listen here to God's response to Moses. Which, first, let's point out, the people complained to Moses, and Moses didn't even have to go to God with the complaint, God was just right there waiting. So, God said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not." The first thing God did here is God met their very real need. This is Maslow's Hierarchy of Need; you can't move someone forward if their basic needs aren't met. The Israelites were starving, God made sure they had bread. Then there's this line about God testing them. Talking about God testing people can get a little anxiety-producing, so let me just point out the kind of testing God is doing here, for all you retired teachers in the room, I think you'd agree, is excellent pedagogy. God wasn't testing them in such a way that if they fail there are horrible consequences. We didn't read this part, but if they gather more bread than they were supposed to, the only thing that happened was the bread got gross and they had to deal with gross bread. There was still more bread the next morning. No this "test" that God gave them was about teaching them to move through the world in new ways. To try and unlearn the coping mechanisms of Egypt, where their needs were fueled by anxiety, oppression, and scarcity, and into this new way of being with God, where they could receive with trust that there would always be enough. Not excess, like they saw hoarded by Pharaoh, but enough. This is a hard lesson to learn, a hard shift to make when we are used to having to scratch and scabble for every morsel, to learn to walk in trust of God. And tests, our retired teachers will hopefully back me up on this, are as much about evaluating

knowledge as they are about making sure that knowledge sticks in our brains so that we have it when we need it.

God heard their complaint. Which, quick note, being heard by God is an important part of the Exodus story, an important identifier of God's people. God's people are those who are heard by God, and being heard is how we know it is God who holds us, God who moves us through these new, seemingly precarious, but ultimately life-giving experiences. God heard their complaint and in a wilderness which seemed to have no life-giving presence, God brought life. This is another feature of the Exodus story, the story of faith, for that matter. God is the one who brings life when and where life seems impossible. And Moses invited the people to draw near, this is verse nine, "draw near to the Lord, for he has heard you." Draw near can also mean worship. What Moses is calling the people to in calling them to worship is to direct their attention away from all the old memories back in Egypt and forward into the wilderness where God's glory is being revealed. Israel had gotten used to seeing glory in power, wealth, splendor, and also in violence, oppression, unnecessary scarcity, and abuse. Through worship, they are given an opportunity to practice for the test we talked about earlier, of learning to move through the world in new ways, ways of God.

And then, after all this learning and teaching and explaining and preparing, the Israelites awoke to "a layer of 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 Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" Or in one of my footnotes, they said to one another, "Is it manna?" For they did not know what it was." What is it or Is it

manna because What is it in Hebrew is Man-hu. They literally end up naming the stuff “what is it,” because they did not know what it was. Moses had to tell them, “it is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”

And that right there I think is the last and greatest takeaway from the story of bread from heaven in the wilderness. God heard the Israelites complaints. God knew that their longing for the past was from their fear, not their real desire, and God taught them how to move forward through that fear to the life God had for them. God tested them, so they could practice this new way of living and being as they learned to let go of their past and live as God’s people. God met their need, gave them what they needed to survive, and they didn’t recognize it at first. Someone had to show them what it was and how to use it.

Dear people of God, this story just resonates with me so much. I’ve got a little picture on my wall from an artist collective called Storypeople. The picture is sort of a freeform drawing of a person running from a little purple monster. The quote around it reads, “I finally got to be exactly where I wanted to be, she said, so why won’t all these pesky growth experiences go away and leave me alone.” I know God gives us what we need, I know God is shaping us, moving us, and, like the Israelites, I’m over it sometimes. Or, like the Israelites, I see it right in front of me, and I think, ok, great, but, what is it? What am I, what are we, supposed to do with that? And the promise in this story, the promise in all the Exodus stories, is that none of this stops God from showing up, from providing for our needs, from giving us exactly what will fit, even when we cannot tell what the thing is. Sometimes we all need a friend like Moses to help us along the way. To draw us to worship, to point us to God,

and to say, that thing you see, that is the bread the Lord has given you to eat. Dear people of God, God has given us all that we need. May we be for each other Moses, helping us to see it. Thanks be to God. Amen.