

3rd Sunday of Lent, 3/27/11
Thirsty Voices
preached by Kelly D. Turney at ELUMC

Each week, the lectionary offers us a piece of the story – a reading from the Hebrew Scripture, a Psalm, a New Testament or epistle lesson and a gospel. The problem is, of course, that it's only a piece – the text has a context which it is plucked out of to appear in our service. And for weeks like this one, we miss some of the humor, the poignancy, and the heartache when we visit just a part of the story.

Today's passage is one of several murmuring stories that occur in Exodus and Numbers. They're the stories of the people of Israel during their wilderness wanderings between their leaving Egypt and their entering the land of Canaan.¹ In Egypt, the people suffered from slavery and they complained—they murmured—and felt God heard them and was with them in their suffering because plagues came upon the land, one after another, to help convince Pharaoh to release the Hebrew people. After fleeing their oppression with Pharaoh in pursuit, the waters were parted with Moses' staff so the people could cross in safety – again taken as a sign of God's presence with the people. And again, when they were wandering in the wilderness of Shur, they found only bitter water and complained and Moses asked them why they were testing God and used his staff to turn the water sweet. Then in the very next chapter, the people complain of hunger and surprise, quail appear and manna—that highly perishable substance that arrived daily and could not be hoarded and again they perceive these to be signs that God provides. Then in the very next chapter, comes this:

¹From 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. ²The 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?" ³But 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?" ⁴So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The 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. ⁶I 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. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Enduring Presence, goal and guide, you go before and await our coming. Only our thirst compels us beyond complaint to conversation, beyond rejection

to relationship. Pour your love into our hearts, that, refreshed and renewed, we may invite others to the living water given to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen²

When discussing this passage with my friend Cathy, she told us of going to Forest Park with her grandchildren, a precocious six year old girl, Keira, and her quieter but curious little brother Kenney. They sat next to the pond with all the lily pads staring off into the distance, taking in the loveliness of the day, the sun on the water, and the beauty of the flowering lilies floating on the surface. When suddenly the silence was broken by Keira, yelling "Look, look there's a frog on that lily pad" pointing to leaf off to their right on the edge of the water. And they were all delighted by the find when Kenney pointed out that there was another frog over there, and yet another one over there on that one. Cathy said there were lots of frogs that were there all along—all they had to do was focus in on them, to see them.

When you read today's passage in context, you see a people constantly focused on what they didn't have and what it takes to refocus – to see the presence of God already there. That's what happens on the journey, when things aren't going as you expected or hoped, you can miss the divine in your midst and instead find yourself complaining about the basics. So this Lent, we get to ask ourselves, what in our lives makes us like the Israelites refusing to be illuminated by God, oblivious to the presence of light before us and within us? For we are all on the journey. There is no such thing as arriving in a land of milk and honey where there is perpetual contentment and ease. We are, all of us, wanderers in need of liberation. We are, in some sense, exiles seeking liberation. And if can find our story in the story of the Exodus, we see one of the central themes is that liberation takes time, training and a whole lot of practice.³ I confess that I still need more time, more training, more practice. In Tending the Fire, that year-long training you sent me to in 2009, we studied systems and we've looked at some of that teaching together, trying to understand how a system in anxiety will react in some predictable and less than helpful ways (blaming, herding and seeking a quick fix). We learned that the "presenting complaint" (that's what it's called – the reason someone comes forward – in the case with Moses, it's that there's no water). The presenting complaint is rarely the issue at the root of the anxiety.

You've all experienced this when your teenager or spouse comes home all worked up about the horrible driver they encountered on the way home that almost killed them. You can sense that there's probably more to the story—that you need to unpack what happened in their day or their week, to discover the pressures building up to that moment. Anxiety cannot be ignored indefinitely. The grief counselors in Japan say they are on the look out for those who seem to be focused on rebuilding anew – because they know, eventually, the anxiety will come out somewhere.

It takes a centered person who will not take on the anxiety and escalate it, but share it with one able to handle it – in the case of Moses, he doesn't accept that the issue is about his leadership or lack of vision, and he passes the anxiety onto God. He doesn't get stuck in the presenting complaint--the lack of water. He identifies and names for the people the underlying issue, "Why do you ask, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" in other words, the real anxiety is whether God is present with them in their suffering or not. Moses also doesn't try to deal with the problem alone, he prays about it, and he ends up taking some elders along with him to create a solution.

To state the obvious, you are unfortunately not being led by a Moses-type. I will admit that with the news of the Montessori school closing, I got sucked into the anxiety about how we're going to meet our budget without that \$25,000 in rent. This last week, I became one of those people of faith, wandering in the wilderness complaining that there aren't enough resources at my disposal. I had to call the DS, who fortunately has more Moses-like qualities. And I reached out to elders in other churches who had been through this same anxiety before. I had to breathe more deeply and repeat the mantra, "it's not about the deficit, it's not about the deficit" – it's about what we want to be possible in mission and ministry and if renting space to a school can help us reach our goals, fine, but cannot rent in desperation. And so we went through every scenario, what happens if the ArborKids option falls through, what if we only have \$15,000 in rent from a parent-led Montessori school, what if we have no renters at all next year. And we found creative ways to make our way through each.

Moses and the Hebrew people, over time, discover that God provides for them. They find sustenance in ways they have never experienced before – manna on the ground each morning, water springing from a rock. They are surprised by a God who provides a way out of no way. But again, it takes time, training and practice. If the repeated nature of the stories tell us anything, it is that you don't get to learn the lesson once and for all and that's it. You have to keep training your eyes to discover the awareness of God. You have to keep practicing finding God in your midst. Which is what the daily practice of the **Examen** is for: to keep reminding us as a people of short memories, of God's presence. To revisit the ways we've been surprised to make it through the wilderness. Like the Israelites before us, the focus has to shift from what we lack to what we have. It's called asset mapping – if you want the official organizational term. It's the process of training your eye to focus what is present right in front of you. And when I did that, here's what I saw:

- **babies**, one just arrived and three more on the way, so many that we need a nursery with cribs for a change;
- **media folks** willing to put in hours of work each week to add visuals to our worship and keep our website updated; not to mention those health care

volunteers and loaves and fishes cooks who weekly and monthly offer service to others;

- a **worship team** who honors tradition but also isn't afraid to try new things, actors willing to bring scripture alive, artists willing to paint boxes and create banners, and do all manner of craziness to offer a tangible experience of the divine. And there are even wilder stewardship folk who go beyond their scope and lead us outside our comfort zone;
- a **20-30 something group**, which is incredible not just because most churches don't have them, but because of their leadership with VBS and lunches, and dedication to fellowship;
- a **youth program** with experienced leaders willing to branch out to help others in the region;
- a **gold-star UMW** unit who keeps mission before us and prays us into strength;
- and a **men's group** who meets and does, well I'm not really sure what they do but they don't shy away from a challenge in the building and they feed who ever is around.
- There are **folks willing to share their journey** with others, be it through confirmation, or adult education, or witnessing.
- A **Finance Team** dedicated to supporting mission shares with staff members and team chairs who watch every dollar and strive to be frugal even as they try to find creative ways to do ministry cheaply (we borrowed hand bells and last year's VBS puppet was shipped down from Vermont).
- We are blessed to have **strong leaders** willing to take time off work to go on mission trips, who this summer will help a congregation sharing property with an elementary school who haven't had children in their congregation for 18 years.
- When I focus on what is **right before my eyes**, I see **Florence Pomeroy** – first woman to bring the laity address to annual conference – the embodiment of mission and justice and peace, who at 94 still volunteers once a month to bring the word of God alive to the children, and those who follow after her example – knitting, bringing meals, visiting, studying the bible and praying fiercely.

Wandering in the wilderness, we may be tempted to distrust God, to let anxiety about resources get the best of us, but by the grace of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit, we may find it is our thirst that helps us grow into the people we are meant to be. We are not the first pilgrims on the way. We are not the only children in formation, learning to take the time to see, the training to focus, the practice to recognize what is before us. The good news of Exodus 17 is that despite appearances, for wilderness wanderers, water does flow in the desert.

1. From Feasting on the Word, Yr A, Number 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 75.

2. Adapted from *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers*.

3. From Matthew Myer Boulton in "Reflections on the lectionary" in *The Christian Century*

(March 22, 2011).