

**“I want you to live as if you believe it is true.”**

Proper 21A; October 1, 2023; St. Matthew's, Sunbury

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78: 1-4, 12-16;

Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21: 23-32

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*In the name of God~ Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,  
Amen.*

In the pre-dawn hours of my first overnight shift as a hospital chaplain, I was called to the trauma bay to be present to a young couple who were in a motorcycle accident. The young man was in much more serious condition and until he was stable I went back and forth between their different treatment areas, carrying messages and offering simply a compassionate presence. When they were finally reunited they were overwhelmed with joy and relief in a way that I will remember forever. Through their tears, they kept saying to each other and to me, over and over: “I can't believe we're alive- that we're here and we're going to be okay! I thought we were going to die!

God must have surely been with us- we need to live as if our lives mean something.” Before I said goodbye to them, I invited them to hold tight to that feeling, that indeed they should shape their lives around it, because living into that kind of joy and overwhelming gratitude is a true and incredibly holy way to live.

There are no windows in the trauma bay or the emergency department of Lancaster General Hospital, but when I left that morning and crossed the glass pedestrian bridge that leads to the parking garage the January sun had fully risen and the entire city was bathed in radiant sunlight. I too was completely overcome by how amazing it was to just be alive on such a beautiful morning, overcome by the holiness of what I had shared with them and especially by their naming that something greater than themselves exists and had played a part in the way their lives were restored.

Today, we hear again the gift of a familiar scriptural story that we also heard in a different liturgical season: the story of God providing life-giving water to the Israelites as they journey in the desert wilderness. In what has become a familiar pattern for them, they bring their complaint to Moses- this time it is that they have no water and they and their children and livestock are going to die of thirst- then Moses relays the message to God and God provides an answer: water flows freely from a rock in the wilderness so that the people may drink. We heard this same story on March 12, the third Sunday in Lent- Lent being a season where the image of wilderness challenges us to press onward to the fullness of all God has promised us, the glorious and life-giving joy of Easter our great gift at our journey's end. Lenten wilderness is not an image that is foremost in our minds in this current season when we are beginning to turn towards the beauty and richness of autumn and harvest- and yet, I believe that wilderness in some sense is always a part of us. Wilderness in these

familiar stories has a message for us about seeking God-how as faithful people it matters not only that we pay attention to where God shows up, but also to how we respond and name God's action in our lives.

Make no mistake- the desert is unforgiving to those who do not drink enough and being without clean water causes human bodies to sicken and die. It is a far more immediate threat to life than being hungry, although that was the Israelites' previous complaint: "We were better off when we were slaves to the Egyptians, because at least they fed us well! Why did you even bother us to deliver us if we are just going to starve to death and die from thirst?" This is a situation of utmost danger- they are not complaining about something trivial- but in these stories every time there is a threat to their well-being the Israelites forget all the ways God's deliverance, God's providence, God's sustenance has already been freely

given to them- that God has promised to always care for them and to never leave them.

This is true, of course, for us as well. How easily we forget all we have already received of God's overflowing love and care for us when we are tested in some way- and how quickly our remembrance of this goodness vanishes in the rear-view mirror once the crisis is over and ordinary life goes on. It is easy to say, "I will!" when asked to do something important, but then not show up, as in today's parable of the Two Sons, or to think we have got it so right there is nothing left for us to learn, like the religious leaders in the gospel stories. It is tempting to just stay right where we are, even when we are in a place that does not offer freedom of life for us, like the Israelites in Egypt- *simply because it is familiar*. But haven't we heard, haven't we learned- both from scripture and from our own life experiences- that God often shows up most clearly when we are a little uncomfortable- that it is only

in those places of deep vulnerability that we can encounter a God bigger than anything we can imagine, the very same God who has long promised to be present with us there.

In today's gospel, Jesus responds to those who would question his authority with his own question: "did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?" They argue over how they will answer for a really interesting reason- not because they do not know the answer, *but because they are afraid of what will happen based on the answer they give.* They are afraid that if they say, 'from heaven', Jesus will say to them *"Even after you saw John's baptism of repentance, his coming in the way of righteousness, why did you not change your minds and believe him??"* The real reason for their fear is because this is a tremendous place of wilderness for them- around Jesus, they so often find themselves in a place where they are more vulnerable

than they are accustomed to being, more challenged to experience the Holy One in a new and startling way. They can never quite make themselves let go of what is familiar and comfortable and reach out towards something new, never quite fully believe that all they would need there will be given to them.

As I was drawn into this week's stories, I began to wonder if we do not find ourselves in a wilderness place *every time we do not experience and name God as fully with us and acting on our behalf*. Today's Exodus reading ends with how Moses names that place Massah and Meribah after the Israelites' quarreling and testing of the Lord, saying "Is the Lord among us or not?"- but I believe the better question might be "*Are we living as if the Lord is among us- or not?*" Why don't we live as if we believe the promises of God are true for us when we have heard them over and over again? Why don't we live as if we believe that God will feed us and give us

lifegiving water when this is the same God who promised to create from our ancestors a people who would praise God in this world and the next- the same God who delivered these ancestors from those who enslaved them and cared for them in the wilderness? Why don't we “recount to generations to come the praiseworthy deeds and the power of Lord, and the wonderful works he has done?”, as today’s psalm says? Why don't we “look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others, with the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus”, as the apostle Paul says? Why don't we get up and go labor in the vineyard every time we are called to do so?

The answer is stunningly simple: we are human. We mean well...but we forget. Our bodies, minds, and souls all get tired, hungry, and thirsty. We become angry when our families are suffering. It is not easy to claim God’s goodness in a world where bad things happen, or to hold fast to our belief that God always provides. ***This does not***



*mean we are not faithful- again, it means we are human.* Our life's work is to live into a way of being that shows how we have known God's saving presence in our lives.

This is the reason I told you the story of that young couple in the trauma bay on that winter morning. The gift of their story is how they suddenly saw life in a new way, one marked forever by their awareness of God's care and protection. I will never know what happened to them- I pray for them a life that will continue to be transformed by the invitation to believe God's presence will always be with them as completely as they had just experienced it- *especially in life's challenging seasons when they will struggle to remember all the wonder, all the certainty of this moment. "I have told you and showed you who I am", God says to each of us. Now, I want you to live as if you believe it is true." Amen.*

