

God in the Desert

- [Exodus 17:1-7](#)
- [Romans 5:1-11](#)

Today's first reading continues the theme of pilgrimage. Last week we talked about Abram and his family setting out for parts unknown, following the prompting of God. Now we fast forward through many generations to the people of Israel in the desert.

If we were to show this on film we would see Abraham and Sarah settle into a nomadic lifestyle in Palestine; the birth of Ishmael, son of the servant woman, Hagar who would become the ancestor of the Arabic peoples and then the birth and near sacrifice of Isaac. We would see Isaac marrying Rebecca, and the birth of their twins; we would see the family disfunction which made the younger, Jacob become the patriarch; Jacob courted Rachel and eventually married both her and her sister Leah and had a total of twelve sons who would give their names to the twelve tribes. One of these was Joseph who was sold into slavery in Egypt but rose to power and welcomed his family when they went there in search of food.

And there the people of Jacob, who was known as Israel, stayed and flourished until they became a threat to the Egyptians. They suffered the fate of many ethnic minorities today and were persecuted and enslaved by the Egyptians. Yet we are told that God heard their cry and sent a rather reluctant Moses, who was himself a murderer, to bring the people out of Egypt.

This story of the Exodus is the great foundational story of the Jewish people. God brought them out of slavery into the Promised Land, on the way making them into a recognizable people with laws and culture. Archeology does not provide us with evidence of a mass exodus from Egypt, but this is a story which has deep truth within our faith narrative even if we are uncertain of the facts.

It is a story of the ancient Hebrews, but it is also our story.

It is the back story to the apostle Paul's faith and theology. In this morning's short reading from his letter to the Romans we heard that while we were weak, like the slaves in Egypt, Christ died for us thus proving God's love. The people of Israel saw God's love in bringing them out of Egypt, we see it in bringing us out of sin and reconciling us with God.

The theme of exodus, of God's love bringing God's people out of exile, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land is like a steady drumbeat.

There are many Filipino families living in the numbered streets of Los Osos. From time to time they gather at a house in the next block from where I live. It is good to hear their laughter and know they are enjoying themselves. But their sound system has a very loud bass. Yesterday the road was full of cars and the beat of the drum was a relentless boom boom . We heard nothing else from their party, just the relentless rhythm of the bass.

That is how the theme of exodus pulses through our spiritual lives and permeates our understanding of God and of God's call. We are always being called forward, always being

called to leave the “wilderness of sin” and move into the promised land. And as the prophets tell us, the Promised Land is not so much a place as a way of being – it is a way of being that is completely counter-cultural – one which frees us from living in slavery to the expectations and demands of our culture – one which frees us to live like Jesus did, a life of love and justice, trust and peaceful resistance. A life lived in harmony with creation and our Creator.

For some reason, we expect that to be easy.

We expect the Promised Land to be handed to us. We have this idea that if we do the right thing and live spiritual lives that we will be “in the flow” and everything will work out for us. There are strong voices in the Old Testament that support this view – voices that say kings who followed God were victorious in battle and it was the ones who screwed up who lost the kingdom to the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. But there are also other voices. For example, Job who lost everything but stayed faithful to God.

And today’s story. We heard, “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.” If they were traveling in stages as the Lord commanded, how come they ended up in a campsite without water? What was God thinking about? Was God paying attention or not?

Clearly God was paying attention, and God provided water. But it was not immediate.

I think this highlights a deep disconnect between our wish for God to respond the way we want, and God’s fundamental freedom.

God is totally and completely free. God does not have to do what we want. God does not have to do anything.

Which makes God’s grace so amazing. By God’s free gift, which she did not have to give, she is offering us in every moment, the opportunity to be reconciled with her, to find a new life of walking in harmony with God. A couple of weeks ago we recalled the foundational story of Adam and Eve. We are told that when God came to walk with them in the cool of the evening, they hid. God gave humanity the gift of freedom and we used it to turn away from God. God is calling us back, calling us to be reconciled and to walk in the cool of the evening in communion with one another and with God.

God chooses, in God’s total freedom, to love us and all of Creation. God chose to send his Child to become human, so that by faith, we might have access to the grace that brings us into peace with God.

But God does not always respond in the way we want or expect.

When Dave Alm resigned and we did not find another musician, I felt that I was doing something wrong; that perhaps I was not praying properly or not listening to God. I discussed this with my spiritual director and realized that Jesus did it all right and he still got crucified. There are no guarantees that God will intervene in our lives in the way and at the time that we want.

God is not a vending machine. God is a wild and astonishing Being whose nature we can only glimpse. And God chooses to be in relationship with us.

The people of Israel camped where there was no water. I don't know why. "But 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?"

When things got difficult they blamed their leader. Instead of turning to God they blamed Moses. Instead of trusting God, they revolted.

Even though God is completely free, God is in covenant with God's people. God will accompany us and bring us through the desert, every time. But it may not be pleasant. Paul writes, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

We may not agree that suffering eventually leads to hope, but in the midst of the suffering, in the midst of the confusion we can be sure that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

We can be sure that God is still with us. God was still with the people of Israel even though in the face of severe thirst they doubted it. God was still bringing them out of bondage into the new life.

So let us not get discouraged when things are not happening easily, let us not be discouraged when we thirst for God and God seems to have turned away, rather let us listen for that drumbeat deep in our souls, deep in our faith community.

God is always leading us, God is always bringing us out of Egypt, through the desert though not always by the quickest route, into our new life in Christ. Let us choose to follow.