

Sermon, September 19, 2021

Exodus 17:1-7

“Is the Lord With Us or Not?”

Put yourself in Moses' sandals for a moment and consider how very frustrated he must have been. After their escape out of Egypt the Israelites had witnessed the great pillars of fire that had kept the Egyptian soldiers at bay, along with the parting of the Red Sea, leading them to freedom. They had witnessed the two miracles that fed them with manna from heaven, and the turning of bitter water to sweet. Yet, now, they start complaining, asking if Moses had led them out of Egypt only to die of thirst in the desert. And they are beginning to ask, “Is the Lord with us or not?” You have to wonder after witnessing the power of the Lord on numerous occasions how they could ask such a question. But they were human beings after all, prone to all the same anxieties that any of us might give into when we find ourselves in a dangerous situation fraught with uncertainties.

The scripture speaks of them as being in the wilderness, and maybe we should think of that word as not only referring to a place, but, also, as a state of mind. A wilderness refers to a place filled with many dangers, where making the wrong decisions can cost you your life. We can also think of it in emotional or psychological terms in which we come to a place in our lives when we may feel lost, uncertain, anxious, confused, or even just plain frightened.

Let me ask you, how long did it take the Israelites to cross the desert from Egypt to the promised land? Forty years, right? How long should it have taken? Two weeks! How long did Noah's ark toss about on the waters of the flood? Forty days and forty nights. In the book of Deuteronomy how long did Moses refrain from eating and drinking on Mt Sinai? Forty days and nights. When the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, for how long was he there? Forty days and nights. How long is Lent, the season of self-examination and repentance? Forty days and nights. For reasons of which I am unaware the number forty seems to attach itself to a time of anxiety, confusion, and uncertainty. But the number is not all that important, but it points to the fact that we can all come to times in our lives, times of internal struggle, dealing with fears concerning our future, perhaps a dark night of the soul, that can extend over a period of time, a time when we too find ourselves in the wilderness. And from a biblical point of view, we can also see it as a time of testing. In fact, in the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses says to his people, “Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.”

Now, I don't know if God purposely leads us into times of physical, emotional, or spiritual trial, but whether such things come into our lives by way of divine fiat or if they are just a natural part of life, they still become a time of testing - a testing of our faith. A time when we have to struggle with the question, “Is the Lord with us or not?”

Recently I came across a writer that I find quite interesting. His name is Steven Charleston. He is an Episcopal priest, who served for a time as the Bishop of Alaska, and then later as the Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Mass. He is also Native American and is an Elder in the Choctaw Nation. In a book entitled, *‘Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder's Meditations on Hope and Courage’*, he writes, “Faith is perception. It is how we see. If we see the world around us as nothing but darkness - a darkness we believe we cannot change - then darkness is what we get. But if we see darkness while we believe in light - a light we cannot yet

see but know is there - then we get something new: we get possibility - the possibility of change. It all comes down to trust.”

Faith as perception. It is more than just simple belief. It is, or it can be, the lens through which we see life and the world around us. As Charleston puts it, it all comes down to trust, with trust being the very essence of faith. We trust that God is present as Spirit, we trust that God cares, and we trust that God can help, that God can inspire and help us to see possibility even in the darkest of times.

I've been reading the autobiography of country singer, Willie Nelson, who has had his own times of ups and downs, and in it I came across a sentence that just seemed to jump off the page at me. It read, “there are times when we are sure everything is coming apart, but that it is actually when things are beginning to come together”. What a strange insight, but you know, I believe it is true. Looking back on my life I can see times when I was certainly ready to throw in the towel - that I could see no way out of whatever dilemma I was in. But then, somehow, somehow, something suddenly came out of left field completely changing the circumstance. A new beginning!

Again, it really is a matter of perception. If we tell ourselves that there is no way out of a particular situation, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, there is no way out because we have convinced ourselves that that is true. The Israelites charged Moses with leading them to their deaths because they could not see any possible way of finding water where they were. Thank God, there was one person who saw another possibility and trusted that God truly cared and would show him the way!

The Israelites were motivated by a promise, and believed they were heading towards a promised land; but frequently the outward appearance of the circumstances around them led them to distrust the promise, and it was those episodes of distrust that caused them to travel much longer than they had to. And I'm sure it can be the same way for us. We become overwhelmed by the outward appearance of things to the extent that we can't see other possibilities! It's moments like that when we have to trust in the Lord to awaken and inspire us to different possibilities!

Is the Lord with us or not? I'm sure we have all had those times when our lives seemed turned upside down. This past year surely had to be one of those times as we dealt with the COVID pandemic, and we may have veered towards answering in the negative. But it is in those times when doubt rears its ugly head, and a little demon sitting on our shoulder is shouting no in our ear, that we have to choose to see in a different way and embrace a resounding yes! Amen.

Let us pray: Faithful God, we praise you that you love us and that you have come to us in Jesus to reconcile the world to yourself. We thank you that Jesus walked the path of obedience all the way to the cross and that you raised Jesus up to draw us to yourself. Teach us, like Jesus, to hand ourselves over in love for you, for one another, and for all people. As we who have been baptized into Jesus Christ enter into the life of the world, may we die with Christ, and may we also rise with Christ. May we take part in your work of redeeming love, lifting up the oppressed, binding the broken-hearted, challenging the powerful, drawing all into a community of love. We lift up our prayers for the world still so full of suffering. We join our hearts with yours in love for the world, and we offer ourselves to you; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.