

15 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21 – Year A – September 28, 2011 - Homily
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32
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“Water, water, every where, nor any drop to drink,” writes Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Within the narrative, the Mariner’s ship and crew are becalmed in unknown waters on their journey, and the sailors blame the Mariner for the torment of their thirst. The poem has been described by some as an allegory of Christian salvation. Scripturally, the sea represents chaos. It’s almost the complete opposite of the arid wilderness of the desert. Yet, to be surrounded by water that we cannot drink is surely as much a torment as to find no water to drink. In the *Rime*, the sailors quickly blame the Mariner for their circumstances. In the story from Exodus, the Israelites complain against Moses, and querulously demand, “Is the Lord among us or not?” At times when we find ourselves all at sea, amidst the chaos of troubled waters, we too can have a hard time believing that God would let this or that happen to us, or our loved ones. We too want to know whether God is with us or not. At times when we find ourselves in a desert of loneliness, or the parched wilderness of life, we ask the same question.

What is at stake here? What is the Lord teaching the Israelites and us in our wilderness journeys? What is God revealing about Himself here? From the Israelites’ perspective, everything is on the line. Their own lives are clearly threatened. Depending on our body size, humans contain anything from 55% to 78% water. To avoid dehydration we need a water intake equivalent to about six glasses of water a day. The early symptoms of dehydration include thirst and irritability. The Israelites are also desperately worried about their future, and their security, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” Most of us take for granted our secure and abundant living. We have water on tap, and relatively easy access to food. The majority of us don’t have to rely on livestock for food or security. Not so for the Israelites in the desert. Finding water was critical to staying alive, protecting their future, and their economic security. Finding food for themselves, their children, and their livestock was also a daily necessity.

The Exodus event goes much deeper than the story found in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which may well be based on Captain Cook’s explorations and adventures. The Exodus event is a foundational story in our Judeo-Christian tradition. It concerns God’s character and providential care. It concerns the depth and breadth of our faith and trust in God. This story has repercussions across thousands of years, throughout many cultures of the world. The story strikes deep within our hearts, at the very core of our trust and faith in God. As we’re learning in our study of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ coming is part of the new Exodus, God’s plan for the fulfillment of our salvation. Our personal faith journeys are like our own Exodus from slavery to sin and death to freedom in Christ. We also experience all the ups and downs that challenge the Israelites – albeit in a modern context. It’s always worth our time to reflect on these ancient stories, from our own perspective. The themes really haven’t changed much. Our basic need for food, shelter, and economic security are still part of daily life. In our faith, we still wrestle with God, and we still have doubts. In our lives, we still have struggles to face like accidents or ill health, job loss or tough economic times, and family issues. We still grumble, point our fingers at others and want quick fixes to all our problems.

Moses interprets the Israelites’ grumbling as a test of the Lord’s steadfast love and provision. In fact, the opposite is true for them, and often for us as well. God is always present. God also

provides. God never lies. God is perfect love and truth. Yet when times get tough, we quickly look for someone to blame, often without questioning our own behavior, and our own actions. It's really a question of perspective. If we find ourselves in the desert, is it because God has led us there? Perhaps we're being led to safety and freedom, just as the Israelites were led out into the desert to worship God and inhabit the Promised Land. Then again, is our desert a wilderness of our own making, the place we end up when we have consistently denied God, turned from God, or failed to seek God's will for our lives? The Exodus story is one of preparation and transformation, but never one of abandonment. The Israelites are still learning to put their whole trust and faith in the Lord, and His provision. Perhaps we are not so different. We do have the benefit of greater revelations of God's grace, love and mercy. We also have the benefit of Christ's life and teachings. We know that God is always with us through our own wilderness wanderings. By God's grace, He will use those times in our lives, those experiences that test us, to strengthen us and help us grow in faith. Such is God's will for our transformation so that we are equipped to serve, so that we can offer others a cup of water when they are thirsty and dry.

Just like Moses' example, our right response in times of need is to pray to the source of all life, and the fountain of living water. In answer to his prayer, God shows Moses how to strike the rock so that there is water for the people to drink. God teaches the people through Moses that He provides for their needs, always. From seemingly lifeless rock, God provides living water to refresh and revive us, cleanse us, and give us abundant life. When our hearts are as hard as rock, He can do the same for us, if we're willing to ask for God's help, and accept the gift, which often comes in surprising and unusual ways! Here's one way of looking at God's provision. There are times in all our lives when the fruit and harvest seems to keep coming up as sour lemons. It's at those times that our faith is tested. God can and does provide us with living water, and the sweet assurance of love and hope, of peace and joy. By God's grace, with those ingredients we're now equipped to create delicious lemonade to quench our own thirst, and sweeten the lives of others.

God's self-revelation continues to unfurl within our hearts and minds. The most profound gift the world has ever received, and God's greatest self-revelation, is the Word made flesh, our Lord Jesus. The Israelites are blessed with many signs of God's presence and loving care, to help them trust their lives to God. You and I have Jesus' example. His life and teaching has blessed us with even greater clarity concerning God's nature and character, as well as God's will for our lives. Whenever we find ourselves lost at sea, or desperate and thirsty in the desert, God is still with us. We need only reach out to Him in prayer to find our way home. Martin Luther puts it like this, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that [we] could stake [our lives] on it a thousand times." Our own Exodus journeys hold many lessons, best learned in the context of faith and trust in God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Drink deeply from the cup of salvation.

Amen.