

20th Week after Pentecost, Proper 21 – Year A – September 28, 2008
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2: 1-13; Matthew 21:23-32
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Do we have any historians, genealogists, or antique collectors with us this evening? Is anyone feeling displaced, querulous, or discontent tonight? Is anyone thirsty? A few years ago, my Mom had been sorting through the family photos and decided to show me some of them. For anyone who is his or her own family archivist, you'll know what I mean when I tell you this story. It's distinctly weird to look at a picture of your great-great-grandmother, or some other relative like a great aunt, or your cousin twice removed, and realizes that you, your sister, your brother or some other close modern-day relative is the spitting image of the person in the photo. Then when someone tells you that you are named for that person, things start to spin a little in your mind and the questions begin. Why am I named after great aunt Susan, or Grandpa Steve? What was wrong with picking a new name to go with my shiny new life when I lay in the brand new crib beside my parents' bed, all warm, fed and diapered, as well as cute, pink and wrinkled? Our minds protest along the tracks of this speedy internal conversation, "I'm not sure I want my life to be associated with the life of some old woman in a fuzzy brown-tinged photograph. After all, I'm me, and she's dead."

An issue of life and death faces our wandering Israelites in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt's evil clutches. But you know how it is, memories are short, and after weeks of long walks and camping out, Egypt was beginning to look pretty good by comparison. Just like our genealogists, or family photo buffs, those who are feeling displaced, querulous, discontent or thirsty tonight have ancient soul mates in our Israelite congregation. Someone once said, you can please some of the people, most of the time. But you can't please all of the people, all of the time. If Moses is listening right now, I think he's smiling and maybe even giving that a little thumbs up recognition. The burden of every leader – be it secular or religious -- is that you are loved and adored when everything is going well, but the minute things are not going too well everyone in the organization wants a piece of you. Moses' experience was not unique or surprising. His response is a lovely example to us all. First of all Moses asks the people why they are quarreling with him, and testing the Lord. Then very astutely, he prays for God's help.

At this point in our Judeo-Christian tradition, Moses is the chief point person with God. He is the man of God, with whom God is on face-to-face speaking terms. The rest of the Israelites are too afraid to address God directly, but to Moses' credit, he is willing to listen and intercede on their behalf. What the Israelites are really doing through their complaint to Moses about the water situation, is demanding that God prove that God is with them. That is incredibly audacious. I do not think I will be taking their lead anytime soon, but then I am not stuck in the middle of a desert with only enough drinking water for a couple more hours of walking. What I am saying here is that part of me has a certain empathy with the position of the poor Israelites. However terrible their former condition of slavery was, they had homes, food and water. Right now they must be feeling like they jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. And all based on the words and leadership of one man. Again, all I am saying is that if I had been facing the distinct possibility of a slow, dry death I think I would have been pretty pushy with Moses, and pretty discontent and querulous with God as well.

As we gaze at strangely familiar faces in old black and white or brown tinted photos we can't help but see how connected we are with our own family, and begin to sense that even greater

tie to our extended family of God, and all humanity. We look the same, we do many of the same things, we may not literally speak the same language, but in all the ways that matter, we most certainly do. To me, this is why the unabridged honesty of the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures is so important. They do not just give us important clues into the nature and character of God and clues as to how our understanding of God has developed over the ages. These stories are a part of who I am, because I am in the story. I am the frightened slave fleeing for my life after the terrible night of death and the weeks of wild plagues. I am the tired and footsore woman bending to gather a few pieces of manna for supper, or thrilling at the rich and sensuous taste of meat in my mouth. I am the indignant woman shaking my clenched hand at Moses and asking for water. Why is there no water in this parched and desolate place, and why am I so frightened again, when I thought this was a path to freedom? Who is God? Where is God? These are the questions and experiences we share throughout the ages. What about you? Where are you in this story?

At different times in our lives, we may be simply the fine, hot sand that supports the weight of many who pass by. We may be like Moses, a great leader of our family or community. We might be the staff that strikes the rock at God's command, releasing rivers of living water. Or we might be a simple follower seeking signs of God's presence locked in our own wilderness of pain or sorrow, hurt or betrayal, addiction or compulsion. The good news is that we have a lot of the rest of the story, and we can walk on in faith, in the sure knowledge that God is with us, even to the end of the ages. Wherever you find yourself in the grand story of faith, know this: God will never leave you or forsake you. So come, eat and drink, taste and see that the Lord is good.

Amen.