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Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 11:4-15

Today we continue the story of the Israelite people from the Book of Exodus. Last week we heard the story of the parting of the Red Sea, the safe crossing of the Israelites, and the destruction of Pharaoh's army.

Today we hear the story of what comes next. Even though God has accomplished a mighty victory and the people praise God, there are still struggles ahead. Even though God sends manna and quails to eat in the desert, there are still struggles ahead.

A reading from the Book of Exodus, 17:1-7:

From the wilderness of Sin 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. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" 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?"

So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

The Book of Exodus continues on. God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and instructions on building the tabernacle that will house God's presence. Two years after leaving Egypt, the people are still in the desert, and this next passage describes more struggles.

A reading from the Book of Numbers, 11:4-15:

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it.

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors’? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.”

*This is the witness of God's people.
Thanks be to God.*

Back in June, when I was contemplating a sermon series for the summer, I thought the Book of Exodus was a timely story. In the wake of the deaths of George Floyd and Regis Korchinski-Paquet, as Black Lives Matter protests surged, as countries were forced to examine the quiet, systemic racism of their societies, the Book of Exodus offered a biblical, faithful way to explore what all this means for us as Christians.

I chose these passages weeks ago, and then this week, as I attempted to write a sermon, I found myself saying, “Ooh. Oof.” And suddenly, the dishes really needed washing.

First, let's look at the passage itself:

The story of Exodus – slavery in Egypt, the leadership of Moses, wandering in the wilderness, crossing the River Jordan – this is a story that has carried weight and meaning and hope for Black Christians, most particularly Black Americans, for generations.

We've heard the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt, we've heard what slavery meant, we heard last week the story of the great triumph of God as the waters of the Red Sea were parted.

This week – this week we come to another hard part: wandering in the wilderness.

“Where's the water?” the Israelites cry. “Were we freed from slavery only to die out here? Did we cross through the Red Sea only to die out here?” And then, even when manna falls from heaven every day and quails are abundant in the land, “Where are the melons, the cucumbers, the leeks?”

And Moses, exhausted and anxious and lonely, cries out to God: “What shall I do with these people? What are *you* going to do with these people?”

Now, we all know the wilderness. We know what it is to be blessed and to rejoice in our good fortune, only to wake up the next day anxious and fretful again. We know what it is *not* to know: not to know when we’ll get a new job, whether this pregnancy will be carried to term, whether the diagnosis will come back as Stage 1 or Stage 4 cancer, whether our marriage is salvageable, whether we’ll ever find our way out of depression.

We know pain, and loss, and fear. We know what it is to feel lost.

The wilderness is hard. It just is.

It’s also part of the journey. It’s part of the journey of the Israelites, and it is part of the formation of Christ. Jesus goes into the wilderness, fasting, and being tempted by Satan.

The terrible despair of the wilderness is the fear that we are alone in it. It is the fear that we’ve been forgotten. It’s the fear that no one can help bear the burden; no one is listening to our cries of fear and loneliness.

We wonder whether our faith will survive. We wonder whether we will ever find God again.

That pain is real. That doubt is real.

But notice, if you will, that neither the Israelites nor Jesus just go into the wilderness and stay there. The wilderness is not the end point, it’s a stage. It is a stage to which we’ll return again, but it is not the destination.

Truly, I tell you – we are never alone in that wilderness. There is a God who hears our cries, who leads us to the rock where we will find water. There is a God who stays with us in our affliction and our rage, who offers life-giving water in the most unlikely, unyielding, unpromising of places.

I want to bring this motif of the wilderness back to the context of Black Lives Matter, and the importance of this story in black theology and black liberation theology. I sat for a long time with this question: how do I, as a white Christian, relate to this part of the story?

Here’s where I’ve arrived for today: I will be tempted to regard certain moments as Red Sea moments. I will look at moments like the end of apartheid in South Africa and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in the United States as triumphs, as victories.

They might be glorious moments. But the people of Israel do not go directly from the Red Sea to the Promised Land: there is a wilderness in between. What is that wilderness for me, as a white Christian who seeks to live the justice of God? When we, as white people whose faith

leads us to seek justice for all and to stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed; when we begin to be curious about privilege and racism and systemic discrimination; when we are willing to listen and to be taught; it will get uncomfortable, even painful. There are moments of wishing I could just go back to not seeing racism in my country; wishing I could go back to living in a white bubble, surrounded by other white people and being quite comfortable with that.

And I can. If I really want to, I can. That is the privilege of being white: I can choose to ignore racism.

But if I do that, I'm going back to Egypt. And if I go back to Egypt, I'm choosing slavery. I'm choosing a slavery of fear and of separation. I'm choosing the slavery of needing to believe that my success is entirely due to my efforts and character, and has nothing to do with the colour of my skin. If I go back to Egypt, I will never know the tremendous freedom that comes from standing with the sidelined.

Have I got this down pat? No. Have I reached the promised land of solidarity and allyship? Heck no.

But what I've glimpsed, my friends, is a freedom and a liberation that is meeting Christ in the oppressed and disregarded. God called a ragtag group of nobodies out of slavery to be Her chosen people. God called prostitutes, lepers, and tax collectors to the table. When we engage in justice work, it is not an intellectual exercise; it is a search for God. It is a search for transformation.

I'm going to close with one little story. A few years ago, I was in Kenora, a town in northwestern Ontario. It's my dad's hometown, and it is in Treaty 3 territory, with a strong Anishnaabe presence in the town and on surrounding reserves. The relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous folk is not an easy one.

There I was, downtown, talking on my cell, when a young, unsmiling Indigenous man walks toward me with purpose. And I find my hand automatically going to my pockets, because I assume he's going to ask for spare change. And I wonder if it looked to him as though I was reaching for my keys as a defense weapon. Or if it looked as though I was trying to find my wallet in case he tried to steal from me.

Nope. He asked me to call 911, because his friend was having a seizure.

I remember the very tight mask this young man held over his facial expression. And I remember the pain and rage that it seemed to me were just behind it. And I remember how ashamed I felt, and how uncomfortable I felt talking with a group of Indigenous men.

I seek liberation from fear of the young Indigenous men who need my help but hate that they have to ask for it. I seek liberation from the automatic reaching for my pockets. I seek liberation from the assumption that these young men are different from myself. I seek liberation from the

shame of being another frightened white woman – there is not so much difference between myself and Amy Cooper. I seek liberation from being the cause of hurt. I seek liberation from the belief that I'm the only one who can help, and that there's no help that I can receive.

So my friends, let's wander into the wilderness. For truly, God goes with us.