

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, March 26, 2017

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?'

Matthew 4: 23-5:12

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Let us pray...Amen.

The people of Israel continued their journey in the wilderness. And water was scarce. And that meant that living was hard. Their fear drove them to argue with Moses, drove them to argue with each other, and caused them to complain bitterly about their situation.

And when Moses cried out to the Lord, God showed mercy on the people, and made water come from the most unlikely place: a rock. Now, whether you believe that Moses actually struck a rock at God’s command and made

water flow, or whether you believe that this story is a metaphor, the people who wandered in the desert survived their experience, they lived. They survived their journey through the some of the most inhospitable terrain. They found water in the most unlikely places.

As will we. For FCC UCC, our wilderness journey will be a symbolic one. One that has already begun. But we will still thirst. We will still need to seek water from unlikely places. And we still might quarrel.

When the going gets tough for us, we might start wondering whether God is with us or not. We should expect that. And if we expect it, then we won't be surprised by our feelings.

We have barely begun our journey, and already two communities have offered us water: Taunton Presbyterian Church and St. Michael's Lutheran Church have both shown that they will share their water with us, no matter what..

They have offered us a home, before we're actually homeless. Water from unlikely places.

And if our journey is anything like the ones who followed Moses, then we, too will survive the challenging terrain.

Though our path might not yet be clear, we have some pretty good clues as to how we should proceed. Yes, Taunton is literally just over the hill past Split Rock, and yes, St. Michael's is 800 yards up West Genesee...that's not what I mean. How shall we be a faith community together, without a building? How shall we relate to the wider community without a building? What will our ministries look like if we don't own any property?

Just like the people of Israel felt fear for their lives, so, too our congregation will feel fear. And just like them, we, too, may be tempted to quarrel with each other out of fear. Let's not give in to that temptation.

In fact, since we can pretty much see how the whole wilderness experience affected the people of Israel from start to finish, I think it would be helpful to plan ahead which of their strategies are helpful for the journey, and which hinder the journey.

The book of Exodus records the many complaints and quarrels the people had with themselves, with Moses, and with God. It also records the times they pulled together for the sake of the congregation. It shows the times people sacrificed their personal hopes for the larger good of the congregation. It shows that leadership, like water from a rock, can also come from unlikely places.

Before we become fully immersed in our wilderness journey, let's agree ahead of time to remember that there will be times when we will be anxious. There will be times that we will be angry. There will be times when we will be afraid. There will be times that we disagree on the way ahead. There will be times that we will be resentful of the circumstances that led us out into the wilderness.

But let us also find ways to agree to always do our best to treat each other gently, to give each other the benefit of the doubt, to remember that we will make mistakes on the journey, yes, but even those mistakes will help illuminate our path, they will show us the way *not* to go. Eliminating a particular pathway on the journey is just as important as finding a pathway.

Even as we are on our journey, we have responsibilities as a faithful congregation: worship, baptisms, funerals, weddings, communion, ministry to those in need, these things will continue with or without a building. Even as the challenges of where to go, or what to do with our stuff seem daunting, impossible, even, we will strive to be the congregation God is calling us to be.

Our gospel lesson gives us some idea of what direction we might take. Jesus wanted his disciples to have a path to follow. He took them up the

mountain, to the wilderness, and he taught them. He gave them hope, he gave them purpose, and he reassured them that no matter what, it was going to be ok.

And today, he gives us that exact same message. The Beatitudes can be a roadmap for us, not only while we are in the wilderness, but even after we have found our new home. The pathways that peacemaking, mercy, righteousness, purity, humility, and faith offer us will only lead us to be a stronger congregation. We don't really need a building to follow that path, in fact, it may actually be easier for us to follow that path without the weight of a building slowing us down.

Because even as we begin searching for our new home, we still need to be a congregation, helping each other, helping our neighbors, helping strangers...those things don't stop.

This thing we are doing has never been done around here before. That is both exciting and anxiety producing. And we will stand out from the crowd of other congregations because we are doing something while we still have life, while we still can journey together. It may generate excitement, it may generate criticism, either way, our journey will go easier if we stick together, if we have each other's backs.

We have prepared for this day, we have all we need for the journey. Let's trust in the God who calls us into the wilderness, let's take our first steps. Amen.