

Sermon for Sunday, March 23, 2014 Lent 3 Exodus 17:1-7 "Are We There Yet?"

If the past two Sunday's readings from the Old Testament were about sin as an individual failing, this Sunday's reading is about sin as a communal activity. We've got all of those Israelites who left Egypt, who escaped from Pharaoh and his miserable brick-making operation, who saw God's power and protection as the Sea was parted for them to pass and was drawn back together to drown their Egyptian captors...they should be happy, right? Moses has led them out of Egypt. God has protected them. There is a land promised for them. They only have to get there.

They should be happy, but they're not. They're complaining.

They've been camping out, and there is no water, or at least not enough. Not a surprise – they're walking through the desert. It's not a picnic at the beach, literally or figuratively. They probably have blisters on their feet from walking over the hot sand. They are most likely afraid that Moses doesn't have a clue where they're supposed to go. They have no sense that what they were promised will ever come to fruition. They fear that they will die out in this blasted moonscape of heat and grit and nothing to eat or drink.

In this passage, the words that describe what's happening are quarreling and testing the Lord. I think that would translate into something more like whining and complaining and picking fights with each other, because God isn't visible to them. Otherwise, they'd pick a fight with God.

If you want to put yourself in their place, imagine that you're driving to the Outer Banks and somewhere on the highway, after your kids have eaten and drunk everything you packed to help you all get through the trip, the car gets a flat tire. You get out, laboriously unpack all the stuff in the back that you packed so carefully only a couple of hours ago so that you can get to the spare, only to discover that it, too, is flat. You mutter a few choice words. By now, the kids are saying "when will we get there? I'm hungry/thirsty/need to go to the bathroom." And you murmur sarcastically under your breath "God, thanks a lot!" You conveniently forget that God is responsible for you having the kind of work that means you can afford a car and a vacation and such. And as the temperature rises while you're waiting for AAA to show up, the tempers of everyone in the car rise as well, until everybody's blaming everyone else for the situation. "I thought I told you to get the tire pressure checked." "Mommy, I've got to go potty NOW." "Why is it always my job to make sure the car is maintained?" "Who ate all the Pringles?" "This was supposed to be my vacation, and I'm spending it frying like a, like a...potato chip on the side of the road." "I'm bored." "He's touching me!" "It's not MY fault!"

Muttering and murmuring, just like the Israelites. You can imagine the Israelites had exactly the same kind of conversation, minus the car and the Pringles.

Now you and I both know that in the car ride with the flat tire scenario, eventually AAA will come and help. We can stay in a motel down the road if it's impossible to get to the beach that night. There are 7-11s and supermarkets and restaurants, and we will not starve or die of thirst. And still we mutter and murmur, because our needs are not being satisfied and because we have lost touch with the hope that they will eventually be satisfied.

We have lost touch with hope. I'd say that was the biggest failing of the Israelites on this epic journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. At regular intervals, they lost touch with hope. They forgot the promise, or didn't believe that God would deliver on the promise, or didn't think it was happening fast enough, and Moses was a convenient scapegoat, since Moses was the one having the conversations with God.

And so Moses went to have a conversation with God about these aggravating people who kept saying the Old Testament equivalent of "are we there yet?"

Some of us are old enough to remember a comedian named Henny Youngman, whose most famous routine always started with "take my wife." With those words, he set us up to believe that he was talking about his wife as an example of something or other, but he immediately extended the phrase, "no, please, take my wife, take her." And then he would make a joke out of whatever thing she did that was annoying Youngman at the time.

Whenever I hear the verse about Moses talking to God about the muttering and murmuring Israelites, I hear the voice of Henny Youngman: "Take these Israelites, Lord. No, please, take 'em." Only it isn't a joke. He is exhausted with the task of keep them going, keeping them walking and camping and worshipping and simply

existing, and he has had enough. The people have lost hope that God will give them what was promised, including what they need to survive the journey. And when you lose hope, you lose faith.

So God provides Moses with a little miracle, to remind the people where all that they have comes from. God instructs Moses to go to a rock and hit it with his stick, and then water will come out, beautiful refreshing cool sweet water, all the water they need. Presumably, a nice swig of that water helped them remember that God was with them, and that Moses was God's servant in this expedition.

Would that a glass of water were all we needed to reconnect with hope! We all may have had times in our lives when we lost hope that God would be with us. That might have been because God did not give us what we wanted when we wanted it – we didn't get the promotion we wanted, our child married someone we didn't much like, our loved one still died despite all our prayers, someone we cared about continued to drink or abuse drugs. We might have muttered and murmured and said, like the Israelites, "Where is God when I need him?"

But God does not always give us what we demand of him, as if we expect God to be our personal servant. God sometimes does other things that make little sense to us in the moment. And like petulant children strapped into the car seat on that trip to the Outer Banks, we complain and say "why aren't we there yet? Why can't I get what I want?"

But somehow God doesn't get aggravated and say "take these people, please." Who would God ask to take us away? No, God is stuck with us in all our muttering and murmuring and God loves us still...and God is with us in ways that we can see and in ways that are invisible. And that should reconnect us to our hope in God's promise and to our faith.

Changing that tire on the side of the road? No one driving by too quickly hit you, right? God is with us. The water that comes out of the tap doesn't give you cholera or river blindness? God is with us. The nurse caring for our dying grandfather ever so gently caresses his hand when she checks on him at 2 am, shortly before he passes into God's arms? God is with us.

We may not want to call losing hope a sin, but if sin is most simply defined as turning from God, what is hopelessness but the sense that we no longer believe that God is with us? When God isn't the butler attending to our needs, we say we have no hope that God will deliver.

And if this is a painful failing for us as individuals, how much sadder is it when we lose hope as a community or as a nation?

When we all start muttering and murmuring, forgetting all that we have, because we want what we want it and we want it now?

When we expect to have the right to do whatever we want to do and the heck with other peoples' needs, like food for the hungry and clean water for the thirsty and care for those who are ill? Who cares about them? I want MY needs met!

Like the Israelites at Massah and Meribah, we too may be feeling hopeless. We may be thirsting for something...water, love, companionship, whatever...and we may even be a little angry at God or think God is not attending to our needs. But when we as a community of believers put our thirst ahead of the thirst of others, we never get the water we need. We are bound to follow Jesus Christ, the Christ whose death and resurrection we ponder in the season of Lent. He is the hope that is in us. He is the living water that banishes all thirst.

But unless we remember that it is not our personal living water, our individual living water, but rather the living water that is freely given to all, we will continue to choke on our own dryness of mouth and heart.

Got hope? Share it, trust it, have faith in it. Offer water for those who thirst to everyone, not just ourselves and our immediate clan of family and friends. Then, and only then, will our thirst be satisfied. Then we will not ask "are we there yet?" We know that we will be there, at last.

Amen.