

September 27, 2020

**“Grumble, Grumble, Grumble”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

Scripture Readings:

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 quarrelled 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 quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Matthew 21:23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

I've been to the desert a couple of times now. The stars were so lovely and brilliant. I loved the unique and beautiful cacti and the stark beauty of it all was stunning. But I had food and water, and air-conditioning in my car and we stayed in a hotel at night.

That's not the case with the Israelites. They have been in the heat, with no water. And when you are that hot and thirsty it would be easy to think that slavery was the better option. So they blame Moses. See they still think that Moses led them out of slavery not God. So therefore Moses is to blame and he is afraid of getting stoned by the very people that God saved.

Now this is after they have seen all what God can do. This is after the parting of the red sea. This is after having bread fall out of the sky. This is after God having already brought them this far, yet they just want to go back because they are thirsty. I'm not judging them, I would need water, I would need shade. But I would like to think if I had seen all that, I would believe at this point that God would provide. Or would I?

It is very hard for humans to remember much when we are suffering. It feels like our suffering has been forever and our suffering will never go away. The distant dream of the Promised Land, the Land of Milk and Honey meant nothing in the face of the current situation. Much like it is hard to imagine a time in the future when we aren't going to be wearing masks and we will be able to shake hands and hug and eat in restaurants, go to concerts and the movies without fear.

But the Israelites struggled to even imagine what the land of Milk and honey looked like in the first place, because many of them had spent their whole lives enslaved. The fact is as humans we are shaped deeply by who we have been and how we have been treated.

At this point in their journey they could barely imagine what freedom looked like, much less a distant land forty years in the future where the land ran with Milk and Honey. You see we can lack imagination if we have not had it nurtured in us in the first place. We can lack imagination when all we have known is oppression and abuse.

In this story only Moses had that imagination and that imagination had been given to him by God. Just about half of all the paragraphs in the first 4 books of the Bible begin with "And God said to Moses". So at this point in our spiritual narrative Moses is the only one who has authority to speak to and for God.

So it is up to Moses to renew this vision to his people. To convince them that better days are ahead and even though they are hot and thirsty, God is still with them.

It would take another miracle to do that, and the story says that they get one. Moses takes his staff and hits a rock and out flows water. The same staff that he struck the Nile with to turn the water to blood and render it undrinkable God now uses it to make the unimaginable happen. Get water from a stone.

Now you all know me well enough to know that I don't think it happened exactly this way, but nevertheless there is certainly truth in this story. When I look at this year, I certainly can't see a

lot of good in it. I like the cartoon that asks, has anybody seen the plug for 2020, I'd like to unplug it and plug it back in to see if that will help. It has been a year of utter chaos and loss.

And yet something that I couldn't have imagined twenty years ago when we were being turned down by churches for a call left and right happened this year. I had quit looking years ago because my heart couldn't bear any more prejudice and disappointment and I settled for ministry as a chaplain and then a call fell into my lap like manna from heaven.

My long awaited dream happened in 2020. The point is that I was so used to the prejudice that I seriously didn't think it would ever happen. You all struck the rock for me and out poured my original dream.

I never thought I would be married either. I was so used to the prejudice I figured it wouldn't happen in my lifetime. I had become enslaved to my own lack of imagination, forgetting that God's imagination is much bigger than mine.

I think everyone of you could probably state something good that has happened to you this year. Even in the midst of health problems, a pandemic, and political strife. And I bet you can think of something that you never imagined to be possible that has happened sometime in your lifetime.

Something to ponder this week. What are you looking at like it is a rock when God is seeing it as an overflowing spring? What metaphorical deserts have you walked through and who helped you to imagine the land of Milk and Honey in the middle of it, so you could keep going?

There is an overarching theme in the old testament of going from slavery to freedom. In Jesus' time that theme moves to freeing people from the slavery of marginalization, lack of faith, mental illness, religiosity, arrogance, hatred, materialism, and self doubt to name a few.

And both Moses and Jesus had the courage to stand up to the powers of the day in order to achieve freedom for their people. In the gospel reading today Jesus once again confounds the chief priests and elders. He did this a lot throughout the gospel.

By what authority did he do it? By God's. And what happened to that authority when he died? In our narrative that power is past on to all of us through the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

In Moses time it was all about getting to the Promised Land, and though he didn't reach it in his lifetime he did get to stand on a mountaintop and see it the day he died.

Jesus was about realizing the Kingdom of God and he told us that kingdom was a place of equality. The early Christians carried on his ministry fueled by this credo "there is no jew or greek, male or female, slave or free". Jesus certainly didn't get to see that kingdom come to pass because it still hasn't happened yet.

We are the keepers of that dream, we each have the authority to do the will of God in our time here, to continue to preach love, to heal our world, to welcome the stranger and sinners alike.

Folks, we live in the land of the Milk and Honey here. Literally. But who did we leave in the desert? Who needs us to help them to imagine a better life because they have never known anything but a hard one? Who needs us to reach out to them and in the very act of including them cause their healing to begin? Cause their imagination to be born?

The kingdom of God may not come in our lifetime, but we can move it forward, we can preach compassion and kindness and love to everyone we meet even when they come at us with hate. We can listen, like God, to the suffering in the human family and let God guide us like Moses and Jesus to bring about the kingdom, to bring about the Promised Land, where all are equal, and all are free, where everyone has a home, and clean water, and food to eat.

2020 may feel like a Rock but we have the authority to strike that rock so all of us, no matter who we are, can drink freely. AMEN



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REV. SUSAN DRAKE