

Focus Reading: Ex 17:1-7

Holy God open our ears to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today and always. Amen.

Today's reading from the book of Exodus records a further segment of the story of the Israelites journey from Egypt to the land God has promised to their ancestors.

Exodus 17:1-7 Water from the Rock

17 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. ²The 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?" ³But 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?" ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The 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. ⁶I 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. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Following a pretty turbulent time in Egypt, the Israelites have made their way onto what we know as the Sinai Peninsula. A place identified as the wilderness.

Many years ago, I visited this wilderness. I must admit, having seen its desolate, rocky and barren landscape I can understand why the Israelites struggled. If they had known what was ahead, I wonder if they would have chosen this path? However, the oppression of life in Egypt was such that the opportunity to begin again, in the land that God had promised their ancestors, was a much more attractive option. What they did discover was that a journey to something new is never without its challenges.

Despite this journey being one of liberation from oppression, a journey of hope for a new beginning, there were so many unknowns.

Displaced, isolated, struggling with grief, they set out for the promised land. It wasn't long before the struggle of the journey overwhelmed them, and despondency set in. The grumbling and complaining began.

Finding themselves in that liminal space between a life or death crisis in Egypt and a promised, yet unknown future was too much. As we heard in last week's segment of the story, dying in Egypt became preferable to this place of wilderness.

Desolation and despondency had set in. The Israelites had lost sight once again of God's promise and provision.

- They had forgotten that God had led them out of the life or death situation they faced under Pharaoh's despotic regime.
- They had forgotten that God had saved them from drowning.
- They had forgotten that God had provided food when they had hungered.
- They had forgotten that God had provided enough so that they could intentionally and safely pause on their journey to claim a true sabbath, giving thanks for safety, nourishment, and companionship.
- They had forgotten that this was not the first time they had been desperate for water. God hadn't let them down the first time, so why would God desert them now?

They had forgotten, as we all do at times, that where God leads, God provides.

One of the privileges of my ministry has been to journey with people as they discern what it is that God is calling them to. As I reflect upon the pilgrimage that the Israelites were on, I recognise that this is a path we all take, at some stage and at varying degrees in our own journeys of faith. There is quite a well-defined pattern to this time of transition, when we recognise we are standing on the threshold of something new, even if we don't always recognise this when we are in the midst of it.

God leads us out of one place. We experience a time of wilderness, indecision, and even grief as we try to discern what or where it is that God is calling us to. As we sit in this liminal space, this time between the times, as we intentionally engage with God through prayer, reflection on scripture and in wise spirit led conversations, we slowly discover that it's okay. There is this sense of calm when we realise that God is leading and God is in control, despite the unknowns of the journey.

In so many ways, and at so many levels we are in that place at the moment. A liminal space, a place of confusion, grief, anger, uncertainty, desolation: standing on a threshold to something new.

We desperately want to trust that God is with us on the journey; we want to believe that God is in control, despite not knowing what the future might look like. But sometimes it feels totally overwhelming. So, like the Israelites we cry out for one more sign, one more miracle. And God calls us to trust.

The passages we know as the wilderness narratives, the stories of the time the people of Israel spent in the wilderness journeying out of Egypt into the land God had promised their ancestors, was a profound and transformative time. If we allow it to be, 2020 offers us the same profound and transformative space and grace. A liminal space where we might draw closer to God, trusting in God's provision as we stand on the threshold of something new, and allow ourselves to be open to what the future might hold.

If we can move beyond the grief and desolation of these past months, God offers us a space where we can acknowledge the ways in which we have been held captive by the past, and gives us the freedom to explore how we might now be liberated to dream of new ways of being in the fullness of God's grace, as individuals and as communities of faith.

It certainly isn't a place of comfort. The future may well look quite different to the past. But change, transformation and new beginnings doesn't promise to be easy.

Over these past weeks, as I have pondered and explored this time between the times where I have no control over the future, I have been reminded of a prayer written by Thomas Merton, monk, mystic and writer. It has offered me comfort and reassurance, and I share it to you, as our shared journey continues.

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore, will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Be assured that God goes ahead of each of us and will provide on this path of uncertainty.
Amen.