

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Recognizing God’s Provision”

I think every preacher trembles a bit when the scripture passage for the day begins with the words, “...and the whole congregation...complained...” (Exo.16:2) Pastoring in the church is, among many things, responding to the needs of people, and sometimes that can be hard to do. I remember a time in another church I served when I was standing at the back of the sanctuary waiting to come down the aisle to begin the morning’s worship service. A woman in the congregation came up to me and shared her frustration about something I had written in a letter to the church. In the flow of that letter, I’d referred to an aspect of Jesus’ teaching. She told me how off base she thought I was, saying, “Pastor, that’s bad, just really bad.” Knowing it was time to walk into the sanctuary and realizing we couldn’t have a long conversation, I simply said, “Well, I was referring to something in the bible.” To which she said, “Now don’t start complicating things by bringing the bible into it!” It’s really hard to know where to go from there. Yes, there is a lot of blessing in working with people and attending to the needs of the congregation but some days it’s tougher than others.

The story we read today in the Book of Exodus is about the time Moses led the people from their oppression and slavery under Egypt’s pharaoh, through the wilderness, and to the Promised Land. They were just partway into their journey when the trouble hit. The story says, “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses... in the wilderness.” (Exo. 16:2) Other translations of this passage say the people “grumbled.” They had nothing to eat and nothing to drink, and they decided it would have been better to stay back in Egypt in slavery than to have been brought out into that God-for-saken place to die. They grumbled and complained, and they wanted to know what Moses was going to do about it.

All of this calls to mind a summer when I decided our family needed a little adventure in our lives. As a result, our vacation that year was much different than usual. I bought a tent and we went camping out west. This sounds great, if you have camping experience and know what you’re doing. We didn’t have either experience or know what we were doing. Our three children were young, so we had a minivan to carry the 5 of us and all of our stuff. We had the tent, a dining fly, campstove, sleeping bags, camp chairs, suitcases, and various other supplies all crammed into the back of the van and in a clamshell carrier on top of the van. I wanted adventure and I knew it was going to be great. No one else was as convinced as I. They may have been right. There are numerous stories from that trip that I don’t have time to tell now, but trust me when I say that despite our lack of experience and our being ill-prepared for what we’d encounter along the way, the trip created many well-loved family memories. Part of what made the trip work was the fact that every third night we intentionally planned to stay in a hotel. That way, at least every so often, we could cool off in air conditioning, relax in a real shower, and sleep in a real bed. Our temporary wilderness was tolerable because we had a plan to get renewed and refreshed on a regular basis. When you step into the unknown it’s good to have a way out when you need it.

The Hebrews grumbled because it seemed Moses had no plan. Sure, the oppressed life under Pharaoh was tough but at least there they had food and shelter. That was better than nothing, they thought. We can relate to this, can’t we? Sometimes, even though we are in a hard place it’s easier staying there than venturing into the unknown. What most of us look for in life are the things we can count on; the people, the routines, the comforts that we can trust so that when the inevitable difficulties come we know some things will always be there. Quite frankly, this is why our experience of the pandemic has been so hard. What we usually count on isn’t there for us. The wilderness journey of the Hebrews brought them to a place where they seemed to have nothing to hold on to.

The saving grace for Moses is that he had a personable relationship with God. I mean really personal. He and God had regular conversations. This is for another day and another sermon, but let me just underline this fact. Moses knew the Lord and he turned to God in the wilderness, which is a good pattern for us whenever we find ourselves on a path that is making us feel vulnerable and uncertain. Moses listened for God, and God assured him and wanted him to assure the people that God would provide what was needed each day. God would provide meat each evening and bread every morning, and the people would be sustained every day so that they could journey on.

In a very telling section of our story for today, we learn the people saw what God provided each morning but they didn’t know what it was. The substance is described as a sort of flaky frost that covered everything. This wasn’t the bread they were used to. The people wanted to trust God but they had made up their minds what they needed and they couldn’t see the new way God was providing for them. This is the thing about constant complaining and grumbling. It makes us blind to the new thing God is doing. Jesus teaches us to pray, “give us this day our daily bread...” and perhaps the key to the whole thing is not just looking to God for that bread but recognizing the fresh and new ways God provides for us each day and how that provision will keep us moving.

Most of us in our congregation are receiving daily emails from the church called, "Moments of Beauty." Kim La Rue, our Adult Ministries Director, is coordinating these communications and I love them because they are a reminder to us that every day there are signs all around us that God provides just what we need. Sometimes we forget and sometimes we get bogged down in complaining and grumbling about what we don't have, and we might even be closed off to what God is giving to us. Being reminded of moments of beauty can open our eyes to see our world and others in new ways, and the real beauty of it is how we are nourished and strengthened to keep going.

One of the things I, as a pastor, have the privilege of doing is praying with folks in the midst of difficult situations. I've learned over time that it can be hard to know exactly what to pray for, especially when the answers aren't clear or the way forward isn't obvious. In those times, I've learned that instead of asking God to help us figure it all out or put all the pieces together it can be more helpful to ask God to give us just what we need for today. This, then, is our prayer, "God, give me what I need for today." And then tomorrow we pray that same prayer again, "God, give me what I need for today," and our story from Exodus would help us add to the prayer by saying, "and God, help me see and trust what you will provide."

Church, when we consider the challenges of our time, it's understandable that we want God to fix it all and get our lives and world back to normal. Today, we can also understand and trust that although we may not be able to see how it all comes out, we can know that God gives us what we need for this day. This keeps our feet moving forward and helps us to stand on solid ground. Amen.