

Sermon for Sunday, August 1, 2021 - "Enough for Today"

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

In this strange year of 2021, I find myself having more empathy for the people of Israel in the wilderness. We heard part of this story in our first reading today. It's a story full of whining, complaining and grumbling. I usually feel some exasperation for the Israelites when I hear it. God has just rescued them from Egypt! Yeah, they're not yet to the land of milk and honey but they are freed from slavery. They'll get to the promised land soon; they just need some patience, some trust. They need to practice some gratitude.

Now I get it. Now I feel their pain. The Exodus from Egypt was epic, historic, unprecedented - words we've heard a lot over the past year. God delivered them. They had such hope for the future. Yet then they find themselves in the wilderness facing new challenges and so much uncertainty. They don't know the way to the promised land. They don't know how long they'll be in the desert. They don't know where they'll find respite. And they are just done with it all. They are weary and depleted. They need a break.

Sound familiar? We endured 2020 and the long COVID winter. Some of us had it easier, others lost so much. And then we were delivered! God worked through science to give us vaccines and deliver us from the worst of the virus. Safe, effective vaccines were developed in record time! They give us such astonishing protection against this plague.

Yet now there are so many new and recurring challenges: the Delta variant, lagging vaccination rates, forest fires, floods, smoke, political divisions, racial injustice, decision fatigue about what is safe and responsible regarding COVID. We keep hearing about a post-pandemic future and how much we will need to continue to adapt to meet it. But we're really tired and we're still in the wilderness. The promised land of a post-pandemic world, a new and better normal, feels a long way off.

What will this time require of us? What does the future hold? What will happen to our beloved institutions - to congregations, colleges, non-profits, small businesses? What will school be like this fall? These are the questions we carry with us in our wilderness. Sometimes they become much more than concerns. They become complaints, sighs, and anger. And that's OK.

God can handle it. Over one-third of the Psalms are lament Psalms, God's people crying out to God: "Where are you?" "How long?" "Why have you forsaken me?" God can deal with all of this. God received the Israelite's complaints long ago in the desert and provides what they need, manna and quails to eat. And God does the same for us now. As we bring our questions, concerns, and anger to God, we find that God is still providing for us in this wilderness just as God provided for the Israelites. One way God does this is to open our eyes to see the gifts that have been there, in creation, all along.

Many scholars believe that the manna was always there; the people just hadn't noticed. Dr. Terry Fretheim points out that in the Sinai Peninsula there is a "a type of plant lice [that] punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and excretes a substance from this juice, a yellowish-white flake or ball. During the warmth of the day it disintegrates, but it congeals when it is cold. It has a sweet taste. Rich in carbohydrates and sugar, it is still gathered by [local residents], who bake it into a kind of bread (and call it manna). The food decays quickly and attracts ants." ¹

In the wilderness, the Israelites discover that God has always been providing for them. They have what they need for each day. They can't see what the future holds. They can't secure a future for themselves. They can't store or hoard this manna. They have to take it one day at a time.

God is always providing for us, always at work in creation, but so often we miss it. We get fixated on ourselves, our tasks, our plans, our worries, and we fail to notice the simple, ordinary blessings that God provides each day. During long months at home, many of us noticed the simple gifts more: good coffee, sourdough bread, daily walks, a card from a friend. Our busyness and our plans were put on hold and our eyes were opened to God's care in daily life.

Now in this different wilderness, God is still providing for us. There is blessing enough for each day. God is always working to help us to see this. And because we always struggle to see God's care, God has come to be present with us in Jesus who shares our humanity.

Jesus joins us and works to open our eyes.

Jesus feeds us with God's abundant love, with forgiveness, with community.

Jesus also breathes on us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that renews, upholds, and ignites us to face each day with hope and courage.

We don't know what the future will hold.

We don't know how long we will be in this wilderness. Yet God is present with us, and God provides enough for this day.

And when we cannot see this and cannot trust this, God also receives our worries, anger, and complaints. God hears us and all our struggles. God holds us and all our worries. The Spirit works to help us take a deep breath and release it all to God.

Let's do that now as we prepare to sing our hymn together.

Let's breathe together and release all our concerns to God.

¹ Terrance Fretheim, *Interpretation: Exodus*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 182.