

sermon-9/21/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Recognizing God’s Gifts”
Exodus 16:2-15
By Jim Patten

One commentator I read recently defined a pilgrim people as those whose living with God means “balancing the tension between promise and hardship.” That, of course, is a very tough balancing act. If being faithful to God is all hardship, few would continue on the journey. And we know being faithful to God is seldom only reaping the benefits of God’s promises.

The Israelites struggled with this balancing act as they wandered in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. This group of pilgrims are on the road to freedom in an inhospitable place. They constantly have to choose between the past and the present, between the remembered comfort of living in Egypt where food was plentiful and the uncertainty of their journey to freedom in the present where food and water were scarce.

Last week we read about their great escape from Pharaoh’s army. God rescued them, making a way across the waters of the sea. In the very next passage, the one right before our text for today, we read about what happened just three days after this escape. They complain to Moses about lack of drinking water. In just three days their joy has turned to complaints. God responds to their grumbling and they are given water to drink.

A month or so later the issue is lack of food in the wilderness. Once again they complain and yearn for the supposed comfort of Egypt. I used to think all that murmuring, that grumbling or complaining was bad. Those stupid ingrates. They’ve just been rescued from certain doom and all they can do is complain and reminisce about the glorious days when they were slaves. What’s wrong with them?

We talked about this in the lectionary class this past week. We came to the conclusion they had a right to be upset. Lack of food or water in the wilderness is a serious problem. It is life-threatening. We would be upset too if we were in their shoes.

We know God is not all that upset with their complaining, or at least the text does not say that God is upset. Some have seen their complaining as a kind of prayer to God. If we were to turn to the Psalms, we would read all kinds of similar complaints against God. Why have you left us to our enemies? Why have you forsaken us? What did we do to deserve this? Complaining to God seems to be part of Israel’s worship life. It is part of their honest and open relationship with God.

The problem here is not complaining, but how they complain. As one scholar said, the Israelites had trouble keeping their vision above their bellies. They chose comfort over freedom.

It was more than that. They let their focus on the past prevent them from living in the present. Their nostalgia distorted the past. They forgot how bad it was being slaves to

the Egyptians. But worse than that, focusing on the past gave them blinders to God's presence in the present. It made it difficult to trust God. And when their trust diminished, so did their ability to notice God's presence in their midst.

Exodus has some advice for them and us as we attempt to move beyond being stuck in the past. First, draw near to God. Spend some time focusing on your relationship to God. Let go of the past long enough to focus on something bigger, something at the core of life in the present. At the very core of life is that mysterious presence we call God, that presence that gives life meaning.

When the Israelites drew near to God, the text says they looked toward the wilderness. One commentator says this was the author's way of saying they stopped looking at the past and began looking at their present situation. They are no longer in Egypt and they are not going back. They were in the wilderness. They needed to face that and let the past go. When they did that, lo and behold, they saw, or sensed God's presence.

We know what happens next. God gives them a gift. God gives them food to eat. We call this food manna. Actually that is a form of the Hebrew word man hu, which means "What is it?" God sent the Israelites a gift and they said, "Man hu?" It was right in their midst and they did not recognize it as the bread of life.

It took a wise leader, Moses, to let them know this was the bread of life God had given to them. They will be sustained by God's bread if they can trust there will be enough and not get greedy. They are to gather only one day's supply at a time.

By asking the Israelites to only take one day at a time, God was helping them remember the only way they can make it through the wilderness is to trust God. It is their dependence on God that will lead them to freedom. It is a bit of a paradox.

Jesus picks up on this need to trust God for nourishment in the prayer he taught us. When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread. . ." we are praying for just enough for one day at a time to get us through the wilderness of our lives, the inner wilderness of our hearts, as one scholar puts it.

This passage in Exodus is telling us life is a test. It is a test to see if they will be obedient and trusting. God says the only way to make it through the wilderness, the only way to freedom is to be obedient to God's call and to trust we will have enough. Are we passing that test today in our living? Amen