

Sermon for Pulpit Exchange with Rev. Shelby Owen
of Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Staunton VA
Sunday, March 19, 2017 / 21 Adar 5777
Rabbi Joe Blair

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95 – 3rd Sunday in Lent

Good morning. Warm thanks to all of you, and particularly to Rev. Owen, who has once again graciously invited me and offered the opportunity to speak to you from her pulpit. I will offer a few words about some of the texts you are reading in your service today. I am honored, as in past, to have the pleasure to share a few of my thoughts, and to join you for your worship today – and I equally look forward to hearing Rev. Owen address my congregation on April 7th when she honors us with her presence, wisdom, and words. Each year for the past several – perhaps four? - in the weeks leading up to Easter, Rev. Owen has invited me to come, as today. I know that this is the period identified as Lent; until now I had no idea it meant that I was what was being lent.

In this transaction, I certainly hope you feel you get your money's worth from it. (Don't tell the people at Temple House of Israel, but I am pretty well convinced they come out ahead on this exchange deal.)!

The lectionary for today includes two particular readings that I will focus on: the reading from Exodus, and Psalm 95.

As with many games, you can't tell the players without a scorecard; you need to know the background for it to make sense, so allow me to set the stage a bit for the Exodus reading.

We are coming to this reading today by jumping into the middle of one of the most epic dramatic stories in the Bible, or in any literature, for that matter. Recapping briefly: in our exciting adventure last time, Moses was sent by G-d to rescue and redeem the Hebrews from bondage and enslavement. To accomplish that, ten astonishing and miraculous events were caused to play out, called the ten plagues, following which the Hebrews are told to leave, and flee Egypt. Then, the powers that be (Boo, Pharaoh!) think better of that decision, and send the might of Egypt after the Hebrews to force them to return, and yet another miraculous event is introduced. We are told of the destruction of the Egyptian military at the Reed Sea – where the water parted for the Hebrews, and closed over the pursuing army! The Hebrews have much reason to rejoice – G-d has saved them! They have seen it themselves – so they have a dance party!

But that is not all!

They march on, and come to Mount Sinai. There they **all**, every single one of them, meet and experience G-d! Yikes!

Fearful, they appoint Moses as the one to speak on behalf of all of them. Moses returns from a forty day conference, with the essence of the instruction in his hands and the details in mind ready to convey to the people, with his face shining, only to find that they have ALREADY backslid into a big no-no, and are worshiping an idol – the golden calf! Moses is furious and smashes the tablets. When he cools down, he then calms G-d, punishes the people, and sets off with them on a long journey, now destined to last long enough that those who could fall into the tainted ways of idol worship will all have died out before they enter the Promised Land.

Getting close now, in the chapter preceding the one from which we read, the Hebrew people began to whine about having no food. In yet another miraculous event, G-d

supplies them with the inexplicable, the Mannah – sustenance that falls from the heaven like dew, looks like coriander, and is always enough, tasting of what each person wished. This is where our reading today begins in this story.

Once more, we read, the Hebrews begin to whine. This time it is about water. The people complain that Moses has brought them out of Egypt only so they will die in the wilderness - what good is it all, what is it for? Not a thought for what has been done for them crosses their mind.

Seeing how obdurate they are, Moses despairs, and asks G-d ‘what am I supposed to do with them?’ G-d tells Moses that there will be another miraculous event just ahead at Mount Horeb; water will pour forth out of a rock. Moses follows the directions, and water is provided in the sight of all the elders, then the people come and drink and take water. So the complaint is answered.

What I want to highlight here is the sequence – or better, let’s say, the pattern, that is established.

The people have a complaint. It is legitimate; we all need food and water to survive. They can’t resolve the problem themselves. It is not inappropriate to raise it to the next level, as it were, to go up the chain of management. In today’s world, we might see Moses as the manager, boss of the local facility, with G-d as the big boss in the home office. Moses can resolve some things, but if there is something bigger than he can handle, he has to call on the upper levels for the answer. So far, so good.

The trouble I see arises, however, not because there is a problem, and not because there is a request for help in resolving it, but because the attitude the people have is one of doubt and disbelief. They act as if no other problem has ever arisen, no resolution has ever been offered, and nothing has ever gotten fixed. They distrust and disbelieve those to whom they are turning for an answer without giving them a chance, without allowing them to even try to respond! The starting point for them, is

“You can’t fix it, no one can, it is useless to try, and there is no point in asking. Woe is us! Everything is terrible. All we can do is give up and suffer. And it is **all your fault.**” [Cue rolling eyes, huffing off, and slammed doors.]

What we need to see is that this starting point and pattern is inherently unfair, unreasonable, and destructive – and all the more so, particularly in the face of the series of miraculous events that they have been witnessing for some time. In effect, the message they are offering is that

“Yeah, maybe you somehow got past the last problem and lucked out, but what you did wasn’t really good enough! And it doesn’t count!”
[Anyone have teenagers at home?]

No wonder both Moses and G-d get fed up with them.

We see this. We recognize so clearly how wrong and unfair this pattern and the response is when we read this story, right? We know better. We are smarter than that.

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So why do we do the same thing today?

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Let me ask you to consider: How many blessings do you have in your life?

How many times has G-d answered you, even if it was not exactly what you thought you needed or wanted? What do you need in order to see the miraculous events that have

allowed you to be here now, today, able to enjoy what you have – even if you might wish it was more or different? What will it take for you to break the pattern we see in the reading, to look not for ‘everything’, but to accept ‘enough’, and to be happy and grateful to have that? How can you move past that pattern, and change?

That is the key, because when you can do that, the words of Psalm 95 will make so much more sense. That will allow you to hear what it says, not what you think it should say.

Many read this Psalm and others with the thought that the Psalms are the menu, and we are ordering what we want from it. But we have it all turned around when we see it that way. Rather than reading the Psalms with a focus on what G-d will do for me, for us, we should see them as directives, instructions that we should be celebrating, approaching G-d in gratitude and with joy, as all of creation does, for who we are and what we have, whatever it is. We have been given immense gifts; it is our duty to understand and acknowledge that – not to whine about wanting more!

May you have a blessed day and a week full of the recognition of all the godly blessings that you have been given.

Shalom.

Rabbi Joe Blair