

The Gifts of Lent: Patience A Place Called Massah

Exodus 17:1-7.

Today's story is one of several "complaint" narratives we find in the Exodus tradition. The author anchors many of these complaint stories to specific locations and to specific events in the wilderness journey.

Manna was given after the people complained about not having enough food. Manna means, "What is it?" In today's story, two locations, Massah meaning "testing" and Meribah meaning "quarrelling," follow the experience Moses had when thirst and "no clear goal in sight" for this wilderness trek began to take a toll on the people's patience.

According to the narrative, our reading for today occurred only after a couple of months of being away from Egypt. Moses is surprised that things have turned so quickly. But that is how group thinking happens at times. One person's thirst feeds the impatience of another's hunger and another's sore feet and another's fear of the unknown and pretty soon there's an angry mob after you.

Moses, of course, then channels the complaint to God. "Can you believe it God? After all I have done to get these ungrateful peasants out of Egypt, they are ready to stone me because they're thirsty." Moses knew that plenty of stones available along with an impatience group of people was a deadly combination.

You may have noticed during this Lenten series that each gift of Lent can be an amazing asset to our lives. It can also be twisted for not so good uses. Freedom, our first gift, helps us let go of the things that keep us stuck or defeated. It can also be used unwisely and inflict harm. A call helps us find clarity in the meaning of our lives and how God is using us to make the world a better place. Some have also used their sense of call as leverage to manipulate others. And, for today, patience, gives us an opportunity to discover new things so that when we act we have better insight. But how do we know the difference between patience and procrastination or unwillingness?

We usually think of the wilderness as the natural wild open uninhabited countryside. The word translated by our Bibles as wilderness literally means an inhospitable place. Being in these inhospitable places seems to breed impatience and complaint. The first place people go when they become impatient is to join the “we-were-better-off-in-Egypt” club. **Have you ever been part of the “better-off-in-Egypt” club?** We know they weren’t better off in Egypt, but it is hard to remember that when you’re in the middle of your own wilderness experience. Oh things were so much better back then. No they weren’t! Those were the good ole days. Really? Slavery was the good ole days? **Silly Hebrews, we think to ourselves, what are you thinking?** Nobody likes to be in an inhospitable place. It is not always pleasant to have to go through the wilderness. We’re headed for the Promised Land but to get there we have to deal with a lot of wilderness. We grow as impatient as they did.

I understand the impatience we experience around societal prejudice toward our community. We tire of the wilderness. I get the impatience we exhibit when set-backs make our goals seem too far in the future. We want to see results. Today following worship the Board and I will bring you up to date on our progress toward making some of the changes that were recommended by the size summit and our course as a Program-sized church. We understand that a lot of this feels like wilderness at times. Are we going somewhere or just wandering around? Do we have a plan? Is it part of our strategic plan? Those are questions we need to constantly ask ourselves as we move forward. The Board and I understand that we have to make extra efforts to communicate what is happening and where we are. Sometimes the answers are not always crystal clear. Just remember this: the wilderness only becomes bearable when you have a clear vision of the Promised Land in your mind. **When people lose their vision, they lose hope.** So when we find ourselves losing hope that is when we need each other to help us remember. Do you remember why you started on the journey? Do you remember our dreams about the Promised Land – how it would be different from our experience in Egypt? Do you remember what it was really like in Egypt? The false memories of Egypt aren’t helpful. They aren’t real. We need to remember what it was really like. Do you remember the surprises, like Manna, which have happened along the way? (Camille, Susan)

Patience is a gift when it helps us rely on each other – when we remember that we’re all in the wilderness together – and that it is part of what it takes to grow stronger spiritually. It is a gift because it draws up some things from deep inside us. Sometimes that which is deep within is a well of character and strength. Sometimes, it reveals hidden chasms of old wounds or past horrors.

And so we tell the old stories that are part of our history – like Moses and Jesus. And we remember the other parts of our story – like Troy and Arlene, the march down Park Avenue to this place, the moments when the wilderness receded for a bit and the Promised Land became clearer. We remember that our journey continues and when someone stumbles, we rush to help them not fall. And when someone loses a love, we mourn the loss with them. And we keep our eyes forward knowing that the wilderness does not define our journey, it is simply one aspect of our experience so we keep our eyes on the Promised Land. As long as we know we are headed for our promise, the gift of patience will sustain us and we don’t have to find ourselves stuck at a place called Massah.

Sources:

www.homileticsonline.com Pitch Patience, March 2011.