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September 18, 2011

St. John' Episcopal Church
Pentecost 14; Exodus 16:2-15

ARE WE ALMOST THERE?

On long car trips, when our children were young, long before video games and other entertainment accessories, after a predictable passage of time, the refrain from the back seats of our station wagon would begin begin: *Are we almost there? Are we there, yet?* There were few satisfactory answers to appease the bored or excited young'uns. Deborah and I would introduce diversions such as "20 Questions" or "Hangman" or play tapes, which sometimes worked quite well. But the pulse of restless young-boy-energy was always pumping away. Once the boys realized that sometimes Dad got irritated at the drumbeat of "are we almost there?" he unwittingly provided the missing piece of entertainment for them with bursts of impatience!

In today's reading from Exodus, the refrain from the "back seat" where the whole congregation of Israel was encamped is similar to the car trip trials. Wandering in the wilderness, for a long, long time, with not even a glimpse of the Promised Land, the complaint was not so much *are we there yet* as, "Moses, *why* did you ever take us away from our homes in Egypt?"

Let's review the background of how they arrived in this place that they believe God has forsaken.

Genesis 37 begins with the story of Jacob living in the land of Canaan. Recollect the saga of his 12 sons, one of whom named Joseph, ends up assisting the Pharaoh in Egypt to prepare for seven years of famine ahead. Remember Jacob and his family migrating to Egypt when food becomes scarce in Canaan. With Joseph, they prosper until a new Pharaoh comes to power who "did not know Joseph" and his tribe. Hardship, persecution and finally infanticide follow. Moses is called at the burning bush to liberate and lead the people out through the Red Sea, into a wilderness journey towards a distant and uncertain Promised Land.

Not long into the journey, the people complain, "*If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you (Moses) have brought us out in the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*"

This is a moment of crisis in leadership for Moses and his people. The suffering and fears are so extreme that they wish they had died. When pain descends it can be easy to forget how bad things were back in whatever your "Egypt", your land of bondage, was. The past often looks better even when it wasn't. No doubt there will be people in modern Libya or Egypt or Iraq who will envision the better days under the previous dictator. Throughout all lands, the "good old days" have a certain allure that can undermine the capacity to live and love in the present moment. In today's story, the lament of the people of Israel is something like, "What will become of us?"

On the recent anniversary of 9/11, many were pondering what has become of *our world* in the last ten years. With global economic turmoil exacerbated by political paralysis, many ask what will become of our tribe/nation of America?

The anxiety experienced by the tribe of Israel in the wilderness isn't novel or irrelevant to us as individuals or as a people. Or even as a church.

The wilderness, which Jesus will later enter for 40 days, is a place not of trials for their own sake, but of testing that leads to renewed strength and vision. The people of Israel did not see it this way at the time. Neither perhaps do we when the going gets rough. But there was a process of formation taking place amidst hardships. Something had to happen to them spiritually before they could arrive at the banks of the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. The journey was the destination.

Michael Walzer (*Exodus and Revolution*) writes, "The conflict, then, is between the materialism of the people and the idealism of their leaders; or it is between the demands of the present moment and the promise of the future. The wilderness was a new school of the soul."

So, what happens in the story? There was a chain of command with God at the top, then Moses, the only one to speak directly to God; then Aaron, Moses' brother and Press Secretary, who spoke to the disgruntled people. It was unthinkable that the people themselves would approach God. Fortunately, that way of thinking changed with the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago.

Perhaps we are surprised when "The Lord" in the story hears and responds with compassion to the complaints of Israel. He promises and delivers meat (quail) in the evening and bread in the morning. Like the owner of the vineyard in today's gospel parable, "The Lord" will take care of the daily needs of *everyone*. In the parable, every laborer will receive what he and his family need to live on for a day. Likewise, God is sustaining his people in the wilderness with bread and meat a day at a time. And so the "test" is renewed each day. There is no going La Bonnes to stock up on groceries or putting up food in mason jars or in the freezer. What would it be like to be in the wilderness and never have enough food or water beyond our immediate needs? There are those in our own country who live with such privation. And many around the world.

In the Lord's Prayer, we are taught to ask only for the bread we need today. It seems to me that God, as presented in this story, is constantly prodding the tribe of Israel towards transformation into a real, cohesive and unified people, while at the same time providing them with what they need. This God gave them a set of moral and social rules in the 10 Commandments. They did not know what to do with the political freedom given them at the Red Sea as they fled the wrath of Pharaoh's army. They resented the responsibilities that accompanied the freedom. But God hangs in there with them. He (using the gender of the story) never abandons them though they would often give up on him, Moses and themselves.

Today's story ends on a mixed note. God delivers the quail in the evening as promised, but the flaky crust on the ground in the morning is unrecognizable to them as bread. They see it and ask, "What is it?" To be fair, there does not seem to be much that appeals about this manna. But it is still God's gift. Perhaps the author's point (or at least mine) is not gastronomical so much as theological ... we often don't see the true bread of life, that which sustains body and soul, even when it is right in front of us. God's generous gifts, always present, are often hard to see.

A few questions: When have *you* experienced a wilderness time, not knowing whether to go backwards or forwards, or to just stay where you are? To whom did you complain? Who heard you and sustained you? Was there a kind of "bread" offered to you that was unfamiliar, unusual or odd?

Who is feeding you *now* in whatever wilderness you might find yourself?

In a sense, this year's approach to our annual stewardship is something like the experience of the tribe of Israel in the wilderness. There is some understandable anxiety that comes from leaving the familiar. There may be disquietude in the face of change. Like the people of Israel, there are matters of trust and shared responsibility. Can we trust our leadership to bring us to whatever "Promised Land" they envision?

In this journey together, though we may not yet see the final outcome, there is a gifted opportunity here to come together, our own little tribe, and renew ourselves as a people of God, unified in spirit and mission.

The Coda

I would like to close with some inspirational words from one of my favorite theologians, Dr. Seuss. The lines are from *Horton Hears a Who*, an epic journey that takes Horton the Elephant through his own wilderness as he strives to keep his word. Horton has promised the tiny people of Who-Ville that he will protect them from harm and evil no matter what. The Whos live on a dust speck. The would-be destroyers of the Whos, the kangaroos and monkeys, cannot see or hear the people of Who-Ville. So they don't believe they exist. Horton implores the Mayor to get everyone to yell as hard as they can so they will be heard. If they can be heard they will be saved.

The Mayor of Who-Ville calls a big rally so that these tiny creatures will make a loud noise. He realizes that this plan won't work unless everyone participates. This is also the spirit of our annual appeal this year. Here now is the exciting conclusion in Dr. Seuss' inimitably delightful language.

"The Mayor grabbed a tom-tom. He started to smack it,
And all over Who-Ville, they whooped up a racket.
They rattled tin kettles. They beat on brass pans,
On garbage pail tops and old cranberry cans!
They blew on bazookas and blasted great toots
On clarinets, oom-pahs and boom-pahs and flutes!

Great gusts of loud racket rang high through the air.
They rattled and shook the whole sky! And the Mayor
Called up through the howling mad hullabaloo,
'Hey Horton, how's this? Is our sound coming through?'

And Horton called back, 'I can hear you just fine.
But the kangaroos' ears aren't as strong, quite, as mine.
They don't hear a thing. Are you *sure* all your boys
Are doing their best? Are they ALL making noise?
Are you sure every Who down in Who-Ville is working?
Quick! Look through your town! Is there anyone shirking?'

And just as he felt he was getting nowhere,
And almost about to give up in despair,
He suddenly burst through a door and that Mayor
Discovered one shirker! Quite hidden away

In the Fairfax Apartments, (Apartment 12 J).
A very small, very small shirker named Jo-Jo
Was standing, just standing, and bouncing a yo-yo!
Not making a sound! Not a yipp! Not a chirp!
And the Mayor rushed inside and he grabbed the young twerp!

And he climbed with the lad up the Eiffelberg Tower.
'This', cried the Mayor, 'is your town's darkest hour!
The time for all Whos who have blood that is red
To come to the aid of their country!' He said.
'We've GOT to make noises in greater amounts!
So, open your mouth, lad! For every voice counts!
Thus he spoke as he climbed. When they got to the top,
The lad cleared his throat and he shouted out 'YOPP!'

And that YOPP...
That one small, extra YOPP put it over!
Finally, at last! From that speck on that clover
Their voices were heard! They rang out clear and clean.
And the elephant smiled. 'Do you see what I mean?' ...
They proved they are persons no matter how small
And their whole world was saved by the smallest of all!"

ARE WE THERE YET?
ALMOST!

Exodus 16:2-15

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." ⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you

out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" ⁸And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but" against the Lord. ⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹²"I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"^

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."