

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 2, 2015
Pentecost 10
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 78:14-25
Ephesians 4:17-25
John 6:24-35

Our Old Testament lesson today finds the children of Israel camped in the desert of Sin, about a month after beginning their exodus from slavery out of Egypt. They are on a journey, an exciting journey of faith. But this journey of faith is more than exciting. It is *risky* and demanding, and filled with lessons to be learned -- lessons about themselves and about God.

Camped now in the desert of Sin, the people find themselves in a serious situation. They are without food, water, and material substance. It hasn't been that long ago that they were singing the song of Miriam, rejoicing that God had thrown the Egyptian horses and chariots into the sea. But now, standing in the heat of the desert, they question the wisdom of it all. They summon Moses and call a meeting, where they say:

“Moses, we've decided that we would be better off back in Egypt. It would have been better if the LORD had just killed us there! At least there we had plenty to eat. But now you have brought us to this desert where we are going to starve to death.”

So God talks to Moses, and Moses talks to Aaron, and tells him, “get all the people together and bring them into the LORD’s presence so that he can respond to their complaints.”

As Aaron gathers the people, they look out into the desert, where the text then tells us this: “Within the guiding cloud, they [the people] could see the awesome glory of the LORD” (v. 10).

How ironic: *To be able to see God’s glory, yet struggle to trust in God’s provision.*

It might be easy for us to wag our finger at the children of Israel, if we were not so much like them. Following Christ is fraught with uncertainty. The life of faith can be risky. Christ sometimes beckons us to leave things that are comfortable and familiar to us, to launch out in faith and follow him into an uncertain future.

But the risks of faith are real, and those risks sometimes make staying where we are more attractive to us, even though we aren’t truly free. *Every one of us here this morning, if we were honest, would confess that at some point in our lives we have retreated back to Egypt, or at least wanted to.*

The children of Israel sure wanted to. But God in his grace had something in mind, as he usually does. God’s grace was way out ahead of these stubborn, short-sided folk. God hadn’t lifted them up out of Egypt in order to let them down

in the desert. He hadn't redeemed them from slavery in order to refuse them the Promised Land. So he rained down quail and manna for them to eat, enough each day to meet that day's needs. **Daily** bread. The psalm writer, commenting on this experience, put it like this: "so mortals ate the bread of angels." (Ps. 78:25)

Indeed they did. And just as God had something in mind for the children of Israel, so too he has *us* on his heart. He invites us on a journey of faith, just as he did with the children of Israel. He calls us to take risks, sometimes with uncertain outcomes.

I sometimes wish it were not so, but I must remind you today **that life with God is a day by day journey of complete trust and dependence.** *It is rising each day with a conscious awareness that without God's blessing and provision THIS DAY, you will perish.* It is the exhilarating -- and sometimes unsettling -- awareness that God's grace is sufficient for *this* day. And what sometimes makes the life of faith particularly challenging is that we must rise and choose this faith anew *each day*, because God's grace and provision cannot be stockpiled.

Some of you here today know exactly what this text is talking about, because you are living it. You are out there on the limb of faith, wondering about that relationship, wondering about your job, wondering about your health or the health of another. Wondering where you are going to find the strength to go on one more day.

Into that struggle Jesus whispers these words: “I AM the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again. Those who believe in me will never thirst.”

British artist and poet Malcolm Guite is writing a series of sonnets on the “I Am” sayings of Jesus. For the saying in today’s Gospel, Guite has penned these words, entitled *I Am the Bread of Life*:

Where to get bread? An ever-pressing question
That trembles on the lips of anxious mothers,
Bread for their families, bread for all these others;
A whole world on the margin of exhaustion.
And where that hunger has been satisfied
Where to get bread? The question still returns
In our abundance something starves and yearns
We crave fulfillment, crave and are denied.

And then comes One who speaks into our needs
Who opens out the secret hopes we cherish
Whose presence calls our hidden hearts to flourish
Whose words unfold in us like living seeds
Come to me, broken, hungry, incomplete,
I Am the Bread of Life, break Me, and eat.

The puritan writer Thomas Boston said: “faith is the daily traveling between our emptiness and Christ’s fullness.” That may be one of the greatest definitions of faith I’ve ever heard.

In a moment we are going to come to the Lord’s table. As we come, I invite you to bring with you the challenges that confront you *this* day as you seek to live

by faith. Bring them to Jesus. Bring your emptiness, and receive his fullness.

And feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.