

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 9, 2015
Pentecost 11
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 8:1-10
Psalm 34
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
John 6:37-51

You will recall from last week that our Old Testament lesson found the children of Israel camped in the desert on their way to the Promised Land after setting out on their exodus from Egypt. About a month into their journey, they found themselves without food or water. They believed that they were going to perish -- so much so that they told Moses they would rather give up their newly acquired freedom and return to Egypt as slaves.

But the God who had led them out of Egypt had no intention of letting them starve to death in the desert. He rained down manna from heaven, enough each day for that day's needs.

One lesson we learn from this experience is that following Jesus is challenging at points precisely because we must rise and choose to trust in God's provision *each new day*. God's grace, provision, and blessings cannot be stockpiled. His grace is sufficient for us, but the sufficiency comes with each new day.

Have you ever had an experience in your life where while you are going through the experience you wonder why God is allowing things to happen the way

they are? And then, long after the experience has passed, you reflect on the experience and are able to see clearly why things happened the way they did?

When I read the story of the children of Israel and their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, I have often wondered why God allowed them to become desperate for the bare necessities of life and then fed them with manna from heaven. Why did God lead the children of Israel in this way?

Well, today's Old Testament lesson is written from the perspective of reflection, long after the incident has come and gone. And the writer of Deuteronomy answers the question as to why God led the Israelites the way he did.

He says:

Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would really obey his commands. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people need more than bread for their life; real life comes by feeding on every word of the LORD.

Life for the children of Israel was a daily walk of faith, a journey where God led them the way he did in order to do two things: to teach them humility, and to develop their character.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we also walk by faith, and we are on a daily journey where God is working to teach us humility, and to develop our character.

So I guess I have my answer to the question of why God led the children of Israel the way he did, allowing them to go to the precipice of desperation before feeding them. *God did so because his purpose for them was not merely to save them from slavery in Egypt, but to make them his people, to form a relationship with these people based on obedience and complete dependence.* A relationship where the people might witness first hand God's amazing provision and blessing on their lives. A relationship characterized by learning firsthand the lesson that when you get to the place where God is all you have, you'll find he is all you need.

Today, you may find yourself in a situation where you don't understand why things are happening in your life the way they are. You may even find yourself on the precipice of desperation, wondering if perhaps your very survival is at stake. You might be wondering if God is a little slow in working his plan for you.

I can only say to you that months, or perhaps years from now, you will have the perspective you need to understand your present circumstances better. In the mean time you need to know something very important. God hasn't abandoned you, and God hasn't forgotten you. *It's just that God is more concerned with the production of your character than he is with the provision of your comfort.*

God is seeking to make you a person of complete integrity, where He is the center and focus of your life, and where everything you *do*, everything you *plan*, and everything you *are* is based on the fact that God is the center of your life.

This is precisely the message of Jesus in the Gospel lesson. Jesus says that if you live life merely on the material and physical level, you are not fully living and are not fully alive. There are needs in every life that only he can fill.

When I was a new student at MidAmerica Nazarene University, a Chinese Christian came to speak in one of my classes during the Fall semester. He had been imprisoned for his faith, and had spent years in a dilapidated cell where torture and abuse were part of the daily ritual.

He was a thin, frail man, probably the result of the inhumane treatment he suffered at the hands of his captors. As he spoke to us about how he was tortured, the class grew increasingly quiet. Then he began to speak of a time when his captors withheld food from him. This went on for several days, where all he was given was a small cup of polluted water. The pain became unbearable. He wanted to die.

By then most of us in the class were wiping away tears. One of the students asked this young man, “What did you do?”

In broken English, his answer was unmistakably clear. He said:

I was so hungry that I would have given anything for just a small piece of bread. But then I remembered that Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” So I just fixed my mind on Jesus until I wasn’t hungry anymore.

God is more interested in the production of our character than he is in the provision of our comfort. But it’s not the world at large that stands most in need of learning

this truth. *It's the Church that stands most in need of learning this truth.* For at this very hour you could be in any number of churches, and the message that you would hear from the pulpits of those churches is that God is primarily interested in the provision of your *comfort*, not the production of your *character*.

But I would be doing you a disservice today if I stood from this pulpit and told you that Christianity was the way for you to be happier, healthier, wealthier, and generally more well-adjusted. As if following Jesus was a top notch self-help program.

Indeed, there may be followers of Jesus who are happier, healthier, wealthier, and more well-adjusted. But that is not God's primary aim for us. God's aim for us is to conform us to the image of his Son, to make us like Christ.

Jesus is concerned to show us that this life is about more than the *stuff* of this life. Jesus' death was not for the purpose of helping us to be well-adjusted in this world. The purpose of Jesus' death was to help to facilitate our own death, to help us to be crucified with Christ, so that we might be *in* the world but not *of* the world.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, the grace of God awaits us. Grace that can empower us to choose what kind of disciples we wish to be. Grace that can strengthen us to choose God's character-shaping work in us, even if that means laying aside our own comfort.

Should we so choose, the Psalm writer reminds us of this blessed result:

“Taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are they who trust in him!”

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