

Hope Exceeding Human Comprehension

Exodus 16.2-4, 9-15

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August 5, 2018

St Marks Lutheran Church

Today is a big day for this congregation. For some of you it is a time of sorrow, because you are missing Pastor Lori and her family. You are feeling their absence in this sanctuary and in this community. For others it is a time of fear and worry about what the future holds for this congregation and this building. And for others, it is a time of hope, hope for all the potential and possibilities that lie ahead. St Marks is standing at a threshold, looking to a new horizon and each of you sees something different. It is my hope that through God you will come to hold a shared vision, one which honors your past, offers peace in the present, and cultivates courageous congregational enthusiasm for your future.

In today's story from Exodus, we meet another congregation who is standing at a threshold. They have just endured a long, exhausting, terrifying battle with the Egyptian empire and when we meet them they are emerging from a 45-day journey through the lush green prairies and planes, in search of the land Moses has told them about – a land “overflowing with milk and honey.” They have placed their trust in Moses and are hopeful he will soon bring them to the land of bounty and peace. But instead, they step out of the lush greenery and into a horizon of perpetual struggle – sand giving way to sand giving way to more sand with no end or life in sight.

As they look at the wilderness, they are overcome with fear, and silently cry to themselves “Oh dear God, this is really bad!” There is no way the land can possibly sustain them and they begin to long for their lives in Egypt. They begin to regret having left. Though they may have been enslaved, living under severe oppression, denied the fullness of their humanity, life in Egypt was predictable and right now restrictive predictability feels much safer than barren wilderness, than the unknown.

Maybe some of you can relate to the hesitancy and fear of the Israelites. Maybe you are worried about the future of this congregation, worried it will not survive, worried about money and the state of the building and the qualifications of pastor who will come next. Maybe you are wishing you could go back to a time of predictability with a leader whom you had come to trust.

Scripture tells us God heard the “complaining” of the Israelites. The word “complaining” as we understand it has negative connotations. We use it to describe people whom we want to dismiss. “Oh, she’s such a complainer. Ignore her,” we say. The word in Hebrew, however, means “speaking under one’s breath, talking to one’s self.” This is different than complaining. This is what we do when we first realize the severity of our situation. We mumble under our breath, “Oh dear God, this is really bad.”

The Israelites were in one of those situations. Their complaints, their worries and fears, were legitimate, and their hope, a hope for food in a barren land, seemed huge, impossible. But their hope was based upon human comprehension of what is and is not possible. Their hope was limited by rational thinking. God is not confined by the human parameters of possibility. God’s power exists in a realm beyond that which is imaginable to us. God heard their cries and God responded. God responded, true to God’s nature, with unbelievable extravagant abundance in substance and promise.

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God hears the silent fears of the Israelites and God instructs them to look once again at the wilderness. This time, rather than seeing anticipated death, however, they see, “the glory of the Lord in a cloud.” Clouds were not common in the ancient Middle East and Northern Africa. Drought was common – the absence of precipitation was common. In this climate clouds were rare and they were understood to be a sign of promise, a sign that rain and new life were near. If we were to read on in this story, we would learn that the cloud of God stayed with the Israelites on their journey. The promise of new life went before them, guiding their steps into the wilderness and eventually to their new home. **God hears the Israelites silent fears of death and God responds with a perpetual promise of new life.**

God hears the silent fears of the Israelites and God sends meat in the form of quail. Meat was a delicacy consumed only on special occasions. When meat was available it was used as flavoring rather than a full course. It was not part of the Israelites staple diet. So when the Israelites were hoping for food, they were not imagining meat. And they definitely were not imagining quail. Quail was desired because it was exceptionally succulent and because it was rare. Quail stopped in Africa just once each year while migrating. And yet God sent quail and so many quail that scripture tells us they “covered the camp.” The Hebrew word for covered means “COVERED.” There were so many quail that that the ground was no longer visible. **God hears the Israelites silent fears of depravation and God responds with extravagant abundance.**

God hears the silent fears of the Israelites and God sends dew. Dew? What’s notable about dew? Well, in an arid environment, where rain is rare, dew is also rare. Dew is as rare as clouds and quail. The ancients believed dew came from the heavens and its presence was an omen, a promise, of renewal. Not only did the Israelites wake to dew, but the story says “there was a layer of dew **around** the camp,” a layer of dew encircling the camp. When the Israelites rose that morning and every morning afterwards for the next 40-years they rose to God’s encircling promise of renewal, of life. **God hears the Israelites silent fear of limited time and God responds with a perpetual promise of future life.**

God hears the silent fears of the Israelites and God sends manna, bread from heaven. This is the part of the story that most of us are familiar with. So rather than explore bread, since we all know that bread, grain, is and was an exceptionally important part of the daily diet, let’s look at language of this verse. It reads “When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.” Frost was as uncommon as dew and as highly regarded. Frost was understood to be a tangible manifestation of God’s breath. We are told that God’s breath, God’s essence, God’s creative and creating force, in the form of a frost-like manna, covered the “surface of the wilderness.” This language harkens back to Genesis 1.1 when God’s breath hovers over the surface of

the deep. The wilderness and the deep are both sources of chaos and terror, both places to be avoided. Yet, the language of these texts assures us that God is more powerful than chaos and terror. And God's promise and power exists in the places we'd prefer to avoid. The people, as they moved through the wilderness, were given this promise each day in the form of food. God's promise was their source of nourishment. **God hears the Israelites silent fears of danger of the unknown and God responds with a nourishing promise of power and protection.**

Today's story is a story of God's proactive love. Of God quelling fears, doubts, and worries before they even have a chance to become prayers.

Today's story is a story of God's unlimited power. Of God meeting seemingly impossible human hopes and then exceeding those hopes in unimaginable ways.

Today's story is a story of God's enduring presence and promise. Of God using signs and symbols and the natural world to be present in a daily, tangible, necessary and nourishing way.

Today's story is story of hope and promise and power embedded in a larger narrative of hope and promise and power. Today's Exodus story began 40 years prior, with Moses being set in basket on the Nile, his mother and sister hoping beyond hope that the tiny baby would survive. And this story continues for another 40-years as Moses leads the children of Israel out of slavery and into a land of peace and prosperity.

And if we were to study the entire scripture, we would see this pattern repeated over and over and over again. Human's hoping within their limited capacity of comprehension and God responding to their hope with blessings that exceed the human imagination. This is the story of God's people. And you, St Mark's are included in the story of God's people. Today's story is about you and the hope and promise and power that God has already brought to St Marks, that God is currently bestowing upon St Marks, and that God will bring to St Marks in ways that defy the human imagination. Today you are standing the threshold and God is inviting you to step over. Blessings to you on your journey.