

GOD WILL PROVIDE

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Nov. 13, 2016
Based on Exodus 15:22-25a,27; Exodus 17:1-7***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm – How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” Last week our focus was on “navigating the political storm.” Now as we move out of an extraordinary Election, our situation is somewhat like that of the people of Israel when they were moving out of the land of Egypt. They had just experienced an enormous amount of stress and turbulence, and now they were heading forth into the wilderness – unknown terrain. Today as a nation we are heading out of the turbulence of the election season into uncertain terrain; but of course we may also have times in our own personal lives when we are journeying through uncertain and difficult ground. For such times, our Scripture stories this morning speak powerfully, for they speak of how, in the midst of it all, God is with us; and God will guide and God will provide. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

In this “navigating the storm” series our primary image has been that of a ship on stormy seas, which initially seems to be in sharp contrast to the setting of our stories this morning, which took place in a desert. But in fact there are real parallels between traveling in the wilderness and traveling on the open sea. In both cases there are no roads, and it can be difficult to know which way you should be headed. In both cases you can run out of provisions, as there is no drinkable water or easily available food at hand. In both cases the journey can be long and rough, and it is easy to become anxious.

We saw all these factors in our Scripture stories this morning. As the people came out of Egypt they headed into the Sinai peninsula, which is a vast expanse of trackless, rocky desert, with only an occasional and very rare oasis. The people did not know where they were going, and traveling was extremely difficult. The people were lugging all their possessions and supplies with them; it was hot during the day and cold at night, and as they trudged along they could see nothing but endless brown dust and stones and lifeless hills. Then they ran out of water.

This was not going as they had expected. When God had parted the waters of the sea and led them into the liberty from the Egyptians, the people were full of joy and hope; in the verses immediately before the passages we heard, there are two of the most resounding songs of joy in the Bible – the song of Moses followed by the song of Miriam, which rejoice in God’s deliverance. The song of Miriam in verse 21 says, “Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously!” (Ex. 15:21) The very next verse is the beginning of our story: “Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the sea, and they went into the wilderness.” (Ex. 15:22) But now, some days later, as the people encountered serious hardships, as they stared into an endless wilderness, and as their water supply vanished, they felt a deep sense of dread. They began to wonder just where God was in all this. In their hearts they were questioning, as our passage said, “Is the Lord among us, or not?” (Ex. 17:7)

When faced with great difficulty and uncertainty, we likewise can begin to have

doubts about our future and about God. Past moments of good times can fade quickly when we encounter serious trouble or threat, and despair increases all the more when we cannot see any road to a solution. What can we do when we find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness?

Our Scriptures this morning present us with a powerful answer to that question, as they tell us three highly meaningful stories – each one a different portrait of the quest of the Israelites for water in the desert. The stories are brief; and because they describe events in such concise terms there has been a lot of subsequent speculation about what exactly happened in each story and where it took place. In one story, Moses throws a stick into a pool of bitter water, and the water becomes “sweet,” as the story says. [*Moses threw the stick into the water, and the water became sweet. Ex. 15:25*] There have been a lot of musings about what sort of stick that was and what exactly occurred in the water. The most fun interpretation of the story I have ever seen was a Sunday School lesson in which kids put sticks into a special tray of water, which went into a freezer and produced popsicles. That would have been a really great miracle in the desert! That’s not exactly that happened, of course, but at least you get the connection between a stick and water becoming sweet. In another story we heard, Moses strikes a rock, and water bursts forth. There has been a lot of speculation about whether there was perhaps already water there under the ground, and Moses was effectively opening up a spring. But there is a reason that these stories are told in abbreviated fashion – it is so that we do not get hung up on the details or “explanations” of the event but get the message that is being communicated in the basic image of each story. In fact these three stories illustrate three distinct ways in which God continually works to deliver us whenever we find ourselves in a wilderness.

In the first story, the people, we are told, had been going for three days without water, which means they were in serious trouble. (*They went three days in the wilderness and found no water.” Ex. 15:22*) They are a picture of human beings who are exhausted, in pain, and at the end of their rope. Then they see a pool. Imagine the rejoicing and the burst of hope as they rush toward the water! But the water, they discover, is “bitter.” (*They could not drink the water because it was bitter. Ex. 15:23*) This means it was salty. It is not uncommon to find such brackish water in the region; there are multiple locations where this could have taken place. The story is thus an image of dashed hope.

There may be times in our own lives when we think we have found an answer to our need only to be sorely disappointed. But in the Exodus story, as the people stood in despondency by this place that they called “Marah,” meaning bitter, God was yet at work. “The Lord,” we are told, “showed Moses a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.” (Exodus 15:25) In the literal context of the story, this means the water became fresh, so the people could quench their thirst and were saved.

But this whole image of God taking a bitter experience and turning it finally into something sweet becomes a larger picture of how God is at work continually in life. Indeed as Christians have looked back on this story, they have seen it as a model of how God now works through Jesus Christ. We continue to encounter dashed hopes and bitter times in life.

The first disciples experienced this to the utmost degree when they witnessed the crucifixion. Talk about dashed hopes and bitter times! But in the story in Exodus, God shows Moses a piece of wood; or literally it says, “The Lord showed him a piece of a tree.” (Ex. 15:25) And as Moses threw that piece of a tree into the waters of bitterness they became sweet. (*He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. Ex. 15:25*) Christians have come to see this “piece of a tree” as a foreshadowing of the cross, and the whole story then becomes a picture of how the cross of Christ, embodying God’s forgiveness and the promise of new life, can touch and transform the waters of bitterness. Whenever we find ourselves at Marah, a place of bitterness in life, we need not despair; but we can trust in Christ -- who makes the bitter places sweet -- and who therefore can touch the painful places in our hearts and lives with transforming grace to bring about good.

In the second story, God leads the people to an oasis called Elim. [*Then they came to Elim . . . Ex. 15:27*] What a marvelous respite this was! Can you imagine, after days of wearying and anxiety-producing travel through the desert, arriving at this spot, where, as our passage says, “there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees.” (Ex. 15:27) This story is a simple picture of how God can guide us to good places in life. The key in appreciating the story is to remember there were no roads and no maps. The only way the people arrived at this good place was to trust in God’s leading. So we are called to trust in God, even when the journey is rough and we cannot yet see our destination.

What follows this story, in chapter 16, is the story of how God provided not only water for the people but also food. Chapter 16 tells of how God gave the people manna and quail in abundance, so that they had plenty to eat. It is a story of how God will continually provide for all our needs.

The third and final story about the people’s search for water is the one we heard from the beginning of chapter 17, where we are told, “The people camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.” (Ex. 17:1) It seems we’ve heard that line before. If you keep hitting the same problem over and over, it gets even more stressful. So what followed at this point was what often happens when people get frustrated and are under ongoing stress – “They quarreled with Moses . . .” (Ex. 17:2) And they blamed Moses, saying, “Why did you bring us here, to kill us of thirst!” [*The people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us with thirst?” Ex. 17:3*] Quarreling and blame – we’ve heard a lot of that during this election season -- and there may be stressful places in your personal life where there is a lot of quarreling and blame. In our story, Moses actually named the place, Meribah, which means “quarrel,” and also Massah, which means testing, because the people there tested God’s patience. [*He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord. Ex. 17:7*] Fortunately God is patient. What the people needed to do was to stop quarreling and blaming and look to God with trust. So the story brings a powerful message: a message for our nation as we have been through a very divisive time, and a message for our own personal lives whenever we are feeling disgruntled and dejected because of serious trouble, and perhaps are in strained relations with others. In the story,

Moses calls the people to look past their immediate troubles to see what God would do among them, and thus he also calls them to move past their fighting to come into a spiritual unity together.

Notice then the dramatic picture that is presented in the conclusion of the story. Moses brings the people, under God's guidance, to a rock. [*The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people . . . to the rock at Horeb. Ex. 17:5-6*]. The people are fainting from thirst, and Moses leads them to a rock; this does not appear to be the answer! But faith involves trusting in God even when we cannot see the answer. God then directs Moses to take his staff, and God says, "Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." [*Ex. 17:6*] And from the rock there gushes forth clear, refreshing water.

What happened at the rock at Massah has subsequently been remembered as a prime example of how God will provide. It is a picture of how we need to trust in God, even when we cannot yet see the solution to our need, so that we are receptive to the waters of God's grace. And it is a picture of how God draws us past quarreling, blame, and division into community together.

In New Testament times, Christians again saw this story as a kind of foreshadowing of how God would be at work in yet greater ways through Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul saw the rock as a symbol for Christ; as he said, "They drank from the spiritual rock . . . and the rock was Christ." (I Cor. 10:4) Just as God answered the people's need in the wilderness, so in far greater ways God answers our needs through Christ. Just as water flowed from the rock, so, Jesus said, he would give living water gushing up to eternal life. [*"I give living water . . . the water I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."*] [*John 4:10,14*] And just as God drew the people into a community in the desert, so Christ draws us to live in loving fellowship with one another.

What then should we do today when we find ourselves in a dry place in life, dealing with trouble and stress? What should we do when, as individuals or as a nation, we are journeying through a wilderness, full of difficulty and uncertainty? We have seen three distinct stories which each tell us a key aspect of how God is at work to help us:

- God will guide us, as God guided the people to the oasis at Elim.
- God will transform the bitter places, to bring about good
- God will provide what we need, and will lead us to journey in harmony together.

The common element in all three stories was that God was present and at work even when the people were not feeling it; for it was the precise moment when the people were feeling the most despair that God's deliverance was at hand. So the Scriptures call us today to put our trust in God. We can follow as God would guide us. We can let God touch the bitter places in our lives with transforming grace. And we can come to the rock, to Christ, to receive God's blessing and renewing love.