

## SPG#159, Lent 3A

February 24, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Exodus 17:1-7

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

When the people of Israel walked through the parted waters of the Red Sea, and the Egyptian army in pursuit, was swallowed up by the sea as it rushed back in, it was a high moment. It was a time when the oppressive ties with Egypt were finally broken.

Moses had led the people out of Egypt. When Moses had pleaded with the Pharaoh to release the people from slavery, he had refused. And then began a series of plagues that finally convinced Pharaoh that it would be to Egypt's great advantage to let the people of Israel go. But then, after the people of Israel had left, Pharaoh had changed his mind, and led his army in pursuit of the people. And so, when the Egyptian army was destroyed, it was the confirmation that God was with His people. It was the confirmation that nothing would stand in their way as they walked into a life of freedom toward the Promised Land.

It is important, I think, to get a feel for the background of today's Old Testament reading from Exodus. And the background is about fantastic occurrences, about burning bushes, about plagues, about the dramatic deliverance of a whole people. And so, as the people watched the waters of the Red Sea pour back over the Egyptian army, they more than likely thought that God would continue to dramatically deliver them from whatever. They more than likely thought that God would continue to dramatically provide for them. And they probably thought the Promised Land was just over the next hill.

But in contrast to all of that, today's reading picks up later in the journey. The people have long since departed from Egypt.

And slowly over time, it had become increasingly apparent that the Promised Land was not over the next hill, and not over the second. It had become increasingly apparent that they were in the wilderness, that dramatic deliverance by God was more and more a thing of the past. And so, by today's reading, the people had come face to face with the reality that they were in the wilderness, and they were going to be in the wilderness for quite some time. And when that settled in, they realized they did not like it. They were hot. They were thirsty and hungry. And so they began to complain to Moses. They wanted to know why they had been brought out in the wilderness in the first place. It all seemed like a monstrous trick. And Moses felt the pressure of those complaints. And so he asked God, "What am I going to do with these people? They are ready to stone me!"

And then God provides an answer. He tells Moses to strike a certain rock at the foot of Mt. Horeb. He says that when Moses strikes the rock that water will come forth for the people to drink. Moses does as he is told, and the people have water to drink.

Now this deliverance is not on the order of plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. And it is in response to the discomfort and the complaining of the people. And for Moses, he had had it with these people. The reader may be tempted in the reading to put words in Moses' mouth such as, "There, you have got your water. Now I am going on vacation for about a month."

In reading this passage the reader is faced with some difficulties and some challenges which are important to name. First of all, there is a sense of pathos, a sense of things not stated in the story, but indicated. For example, when the reader encounters the plight of the people and their complaining, the response of striking a rock and water bubbling out might seem to be a minimal response. And the reader might be tempted to fill in certain blanks and have God say, "Here is your water. And by the way, the Promised Land is just over this next hill. So don't worry about a thing." But no. The story is about the peoples' complaining. It is about God's minimal response. And God's response to their complaints is just enough to keep them going in the wilderness, to keep them going toward the Promised Land.

The benefit of the story for the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader is proportionate to the reader's ability to stay with the unpleasant and understated realities of the story. It is about the peoples' complaining. It is about Moses' exasperation. And it is about a somewhat muted response from God. Thus, the challenge to the reader is to stay with the story, to realize that there are larger things indicated if one can stay with the story.

What really is underlined in the story is never referred to directly. When God provided water, or just enough to continue, He was in effect affirming the importance of the peoples' journey in the wilderness. He was in effect saying, "Your thirst, your survival are very important to me. And I will tell you what is equally important, that you continue on your journey in the wilderness. That you continue to believe, that you continue to be faithful to the promises I have given you." And so there is something larger going on in the story. But it is never put into words.

If we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are able to stay with the story, then we ourselves can benefit from the larger meaning in our lives. And Lent is the time we reflect on some of the more difficult, unpleasant, and challenging teachings of the scripture.

In our own lives, at times, life is not easy. There can be health problems, financial problems, relationship problems with family and loved ones, difficult decisions, discouragements, loneliness, fatigue, just to name few. And that list would comprise what we have called in today's story the peoples' complaints.

And it may be that in our lives that we have been told to not complain in the face of adversity. Perhaps we have been told to grin and bear it. Perhaps we have just decided, "Life is hard enough. It will just make things worse by complaining." And I suppose that constant complaining is not the most helpful thing in the world.

But in the story the peoples' complaints have a place. They have an importance. And God's response with the water is His response to the peoples' complaints. So, what are we to make of that? This is what I make of it.

The difficulties in life are not meant to hopelessly weight us down. Our journey in the wilderness is not meant to be totally discouraging. But out of the Old Testament particularly we discern the teaching that complaints are to be wrestled with. Complaints are to have a place. Struggling is to have a place. Bitterness and discouragement and anger should be voiced in our prayers, and when appropriate with people we know.

And it may be that God will not respond with a winning lottery ticket. He may not respond with the eradication of all our difficulties. But he may respond with water at the rock. He may respond with just enough help for you to continue.

And we may say, "Lord, it is not enough. I want the whole thing. I want the removal of all my difficulties." But in life we may get just enough to continue.

And the indicated truth in that is that your journey has an importance beyond words. Your life has an importance that is beyond words. And that importance is not always stated. But in many ways it is indicated. I believe that for each of us, before we were born, that God called our name to live in these times, to go on a journey that no one else can go on. I believe that God has called each of us to do something that no one else can do. And I believe that he causes the beat of each heart and the inhaling and exhaling of each breath because of the inexplicable importance of each of our lives.

In those lives our anger and our complaints are to be wrestled with. They are not meant to weight us down. In our wrestling they are meant to point us again to the importance of the journey, to the importance of a life. May we discern the value of our own lives and our own journeys in the encounters and events of our own lives. Amen.