

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2020

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: What is this?
All: This is grace and mercy, the gifts of God which rain down upon us whether we deserve it or not.

One: What is this?
All: This is salvation and shalom, which God gives to us in the wilderness of our lives.

One: What is this?
All: This is the manna, the “What is it?” that supports and sustains, the mystery that God shares freely.

One: If we seek the Lord we will find God among us, a living presence in the wilderness, calling us, sheltering us, saving us.
All: Come, let us seek this Lord.

***OPENING HYMN “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” GtG 65**

One: Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land.
All: I am weak,
One: but thou art mighty.
All: Hold me with thy powerful hand.
One: Bread of heaven,
All: bread of heaven,
Unison: feed me till I want no more.

One: Open now the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow.
**All: Let the fire and cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through.**

One: Strong deliverer,
All: strong deliverer,
Unison: be thou still my strength and shield.

One: When I tread the verge of Jordan,
All: bid my anxious fears subside.
One: Death of death, and hell's destruction,
All: land me safe on Canaan's side.
One: Songs of praises,
All: songs of praises
Unison: I will ever give to thee.

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

O God, we question your love and fail to heed your guidance. When we speak to you, it is often to beg or complain, not to give thanks. Our greed outruns our gratitude. We live fearfully rather than faithfully. When you assure and bless us, we are not satisfied. O God, forgive us and fill our hearts with gratitude. Infuse your spirit into our beings so that we might be reconciled to you and follow in your way. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: God's mercy comes to us in our disobedience.
All: God's gracious favor answers our cry for help.
One: God hears our complaining and provides for us in unexpected ways in the desert places of our lives.
All: Let us come to the saving waters.
One: Taste the bread God gives us to eat.
All: We are a people forgiven and blessed.
Unison: Thanks be to God!

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: And also with you.

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Exodus 16:2-15
Exodus 17:1-7

EXODUS 16:2-15 (New Revised Standard Version+)

² The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³ The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat around pots of meat and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you, and each day the people are to go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵ On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days." ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, who has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?" ⁸ And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against the Lord—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD."

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Come before the LORD, who has heard your complaining.'" ¹⁰ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they turned toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹² "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will have your fill of bread; then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'"

¹³ In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

EXODUS 17:1-7 (various)

¹ The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from the Wilderness of Sin, to continue their journey, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people argued with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah [which means "test"] and Meribah [which means "argument"], because the Israelites argued with and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON by Pastor Bill Vincent

The wilderness: a place where the people murmur and complain, grumble and argue.
-a landscape devoid of much of anything -- empty of much that is needed to support and sustain life.
-a wasteland where water is scarce and so is food, or both are non-existent.
-a geography with nothing that we need...
...except for the grace of God.

According to our stories, the wilderness is also the place where testing occurs.
The people test God: *“Is the LORD among us or not?”* (17:7).
God tests the people, *“whether they will follow my instruction or not”* (16:4) ... or perhaps, whether they will follow at all.

The test of the wilderness: hunger and thirst. Food and water: needs basic for survival.
Will God provide, or not?
The stories we read today say, “Yes!” The people are hungry, and God provides food.
The people are thirsty, and God provides water.
Seems simple enough.

Yet even at this most basic level, these stories push us to consider a deeper hunger, a deeper thirst.
Not to discount the physical and very real needs of the people.
But to point to an underlying need, a deeper need.

Maybe this deeper need is the test:
-confessing that, much of the time, what’s empty is not so much the belly but the heart.
-admitting that, much of the time, what’s parched is not so much the throat but the soul.
-recognizing the deeper need in oneself, and acknowledging that God -- and only God -- can satisfy this deeper hunger, this deeper thirst.

Now when I say this, I am not saying that the belly and the throat are unimportant.
To suggest that God provides for only the deeper need and ignores the other needs of day-to-day life is to set up a false dichotomy.
Yet there is a priority.

Note what Jesus says on the Sermon on the Mount:

Seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

What is of first priority is God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness: *“whether the people will follow the Lord’s instruction or not”* (Ex.16:4). The prime focus is God’s work, God’s will, God’s way -- God! But are the other hungers/thirsts (needs) ignored? No; for

“indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:32-33)

“All these things will be given to you as well.”

And what better illustration of that than water bursting forth from the rock and ‘bread’ “rain[ing] down from heaven” for the people ... in the wilderness.

You see, crossing the Red Sea was amazing. Escaping Egypt was thrilling. The whole experience was foundational to the people’s life.

But here in these stories, we are reminded that the journey is not over.

Not by a long shot.

The need to trust is not over.

Not by a long shot.

What will sustain the people? Who will sustain us?

God will. God will.

Who hasn’t complained and been (at least) a little testy in their wilderness wandering? -pandemic sweeps the country, and the world. Hearing different voices about it. The stress. Is it dangerous, or not? How do I protect myself, and others? The economic stress, the loss of income.

-a tropical storm dumps feet -- not inches, but feet -- of rain along the Gulf coast. And people’s lives and livelihoods are washed away.

-when people are treated unfairly and oppressed for centuries, and the voices lifted up in protest seem to fall on deaf and uncaring ears.

-when an accident turns life upside down and threatens life altogether.

-when a dream long sought lies shattered, and hope is dashed.

...the places where life is dry and non-sustaining.

...where life saps our strength, and our hope.

...where we quickly use up the resources and reserves of our lives, and are left panting and starving, and wondering how we can go on.

And we wonder: *“Is the Lord among us or not?”* Will God provide for us, or not?

And God wonders: Will we trust, or not?

The call, challenge to us -- just as it was for the Israelites -- is to trust that God will provide; and to live in light of that trust, guided and directed by that affirmation.

That can be difficult for us in a time and landscape when we are uncertain who to trust and whose word to believe.

How do we do that?

-How do we believe/trust?

-How do we live in light of that trust?

I think part of the answer is found at the juncture of faith and sight, whether with the eyes, or with the heart.

I am reminded of what the Letter to the Hebrews says about faith:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
(Hebrews 11:1)

Faith is that assurance, that conviction, that certainty that we claim that then enables and motivates us to do things and live in a particular way in spite of a lack of seeing.

At the same time, I want to suggest that there is a working relationship between faith/trust and sight: i.e., it is as we live by faith that our eyes and hearts are opened and we see and discern, rightly; and it is in seeing and discerning with our eyes and hearts that our faith is confirmed and bolstered, strengthened and sustained.

And so the miracle of the water from the rock is done “*in the sight of the elders of Israel*” (17:6).

But also, somehow that sense of routine and rhythm, that regularity and ‘discipline’ of collecting manna in the morning and gathering quail in the evening has something to do with it all.

Do we see signs of such regularity of God’s providing for us? In the air we breathe and the seasons that change. In the crops that grow and the rain that falls. In the sun that shines ... and the Son who shines.

And through the giving and sharing and support of community - i.e., each other.

One of the ways that **I** can affirm that we live by this faith in the providing of God is in/through community.

-my experience of the support and sustenance of community through a barren landscape and wilderness days.

You and I can provide spiritual, and physical, manna(bread) and water for one another.

I.e., what we can do to be a part of meeting the basic, physical needs of others’ hunger and thirst; but also what we can do to be a part of meeting the deeper hunger and thirst of others, and encouraging in one another the deeper trust in the trust-worthiness of God.

Through acts of providing ... food pantry, community meals,...

And through testimony (witness). E.g., the elders: did they return to the camp and tell others what they saw? how God provided for them through the spewing of water from the rock?

What have we seen? Where have we seen? How have we seen? And will we witness to how God has provided for us, in order to shine a light on how God will provide for others, even in and through us?

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

Will God provide for us, or not?

The test of the wilderness: Will we trust God to provide?

How will we bolster our trust (faith) in the trust-worthiness of God?

And how will we live that out? working alongside God to share that provision, to embody that providing and presence; so that others, too, will come to believe that, indeed, the Lord is among us, even in our wilderness moments and lives.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

In life and in death we belong to God.

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

**With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Lord, in your mercy...

People: ...hear our prayer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Contemporary)*

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

Our offerings are an expression of our faith, O God. They tell of our thankfulness; they speak of blessings received and cheerfully shared. We are grateful for the privilege of giving from the abundance you provide. With our offerings we rededicate our lives and work to fulfill your purposes in the world. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “God of Grace and God of Glory” GtG 307

One: God of grace and God of glory,
on thy people pour thy power;

**All: crown thine ancient church's story;
bring its bud to glorious flower.**

One: Grant us wisdom,

All: grant us courage,

Unison: for the facing of this hour.

One: Lo! the hosts of evil round us
scorn thy Christ,

All: assail his ways!

One: From the fears that long have bound us

All: free our hearts to faith and praise.

One: Grant us wisdom,

All: grant us courage,

Unison: for the living of these days.

One: Cure thy children's warring madness;

All: bend our pride to thy control;

One: shame our wanton, selfish gladness,

All: rich in things and poor in soul.

One: Grant us wisdom,

All: grant us courage,

Unison: lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

One: Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore.
**All: Let the gift of thy salvation
be our glory evermore.**
One: Grant us wisdom,
All: grant us courage,
Unison: serving thee whom we adore.

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: Go out to gather and share what God provides.
All: There is work to do; there are people to help.
One: God rains on us daily the bread of heaven;
All: it is ours to receive and share.
One: God bids us drink deeply of life's possibilities;
All: the fountain of God's love never runs dry.
One: Be aware in new ways of God's presence.
All: May we be open to God's gifts and God's call.
One: Every morning you will see the glory of God;
All: every evening you will know God's mercy.
One: Rest in the knowledge that God always provides.
May the God who is always near
bless and keep you on your journey.
And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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