

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
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Moses: Water, Quail, Manna | Exodus 15-17**

This is a story we teach to our children, even in the larger culture...and this story is three thousand years old. We are spending much of this autumn talking about one person, Moses, and the people that surrounded him to see if there are any lessons from 3,000 years ago that can help us. We have spent the last several weeks talking about the slavery of Egypt, the growing up of Moses, the Passover that killed the Egyptians and saved the Israelites, and last week the crossing of the Red Sea. At this point in the story, the Israelites are on the other side of the sea, the Egyptian army has been defeated, and they have been promised that they would go from slavery to the Promised Land, to Canaan, which is up to the north somewhere, and this land would be filled with milk and honey. Now, the reality is that it's like a forty day walk; if you go slow it's like a forty day walk from the edge of Egypt up to the bottom of the Promised Land, to where Canaan starts. But it takes Moses a lot longer than forty days to get there. As a matter of fact, it takes forty years. As a matter of fact, Moses does not quite make it himself. So why would a trip of forty days take forty years after you have just walked through the Red Sea? God is with you...miracles happen. Why so long? Well, scholars have looked at this for a long time. Yesterday my wife was gracious and looked at the text to give me a little help. She found a commentary that told why it took so long...and yet the reality is that they didn't know where they were going, except for Moses. Moses has spent the last forty years of his life as a shepherd for the Midianites, wandering the wilderness. He knows every wadi, every desert, every oasis...he knows how to get to the Promised Land. The people don't, but he does. But God makes clear that the journey needs to take longer than the direct route because of something we heard last week. Last week we said that the first half is God getting the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and the second half of the exodus is God getting them to the Promised Land. Here's the problem: they got out of Egypt, but Egypt didn't get out of them. In many, many ways they were still slaves to Egyptian culture, slaves to Egyptian fears, slaves to Egyptian gods, and if they had shown up forty days later to the Promised Land, they would have been wiped out. God knew that they needed to grow. God knows you need to grow too. Just like me.

Last week I talked about why we tell Old Testament stories. The apostle Paul was a rabbi before he became a follower of Jesus, and he said this is why you look at Old Testament stories—because what was written in earlier times was

written for our instruction. What happened to them helps us, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the scriptures—if they can make it, we can make it, the encouragement of the scriptures—we can have hope. So, we will take just a second today on how followers of Jesus can learn from this story in scripture. Over the last couple thousand years when the church has looked at the New Testament, it primarily teaches the reactions of the disciples. But it learns from the reactions of the Pharisees. It learns from the reactions of the older brother of the prodigal son, because the teacher will often say, “You and I are not in danger of not knowing who Jesus is. You know who Jesus is. You and I, we’re in danger of becoming Pharisees. In the same way, in the Old Testament, it’s not hagiography, it’s not the life of the leader so much as it’s the story of the people of Israel. And the lessons that the people of Israel were going to learn are the same as ours. See, the way that they commonly failed was they let their fear of what lay ahead, or their desire for what was behind, stop them from acting on the faith that they should have had. In other words, by now they have seen all the Egyptians die, all the Jews live, the water split apart, they go through and they are saved by God. They should have been ready to go forward, but they kept looking back and they kept being afraid. They have what is called “spiritual amnesia.” Many of you, by Wednesday afternoon, have spiritual amnesia, and the reason for that is that you have been speaking Egyptian ever since you left this room. Our culture pushes us away, and it says *you should have this* and *you should be afraid of that*. So, just like the slaves, they got out of Egypt but Egypt didn’t get out of them. I want to ask you, do you have an Egyptian address? Do you have an Egyptian email account? I think that’s why the apostle Paul says we need these stories.

We pick up the same story Kathleen was telling the kids, Exodus 15. It comes right after the parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptian army. It says,

<sup>22</sup> Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur.

There will be four different deserts before they get to the Promised Land.

For three days they travelled in the desert without finding water. <sup>23</sup> When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) <sup>24</sup> So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’ <sup>25</sup> Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink.

This next paragraph is a key to what is going on. I would like you to read it with me. Would you please?

There the Lord issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test. <sup>26</sup> He said, 'If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you.' [Exodus 15:22-26]

I am the Lord who heals. My desire is that you would be healed, but tests are a part of the life of faith. Tests are a part of the life of faith, not because God doesn't know the answer, but because you don't know the answer. And we need to learn together. Will we obey God when it's not convenient? Will we trust God when we are scared?

So, then the Israelites came to Elim...

<sup>27</sup> Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water. [Exodus 15:27]

They rehydrated, and that got them ready for chapter 16:

**16** The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin...

Second desert. Every life must go into the desert. Your life will have desert. Almost every life will have to go into the desert again and again, because if you're like me, you forget the lessons you learned and you go back to "normal." Or you need to learn something new, and so do the Israelites. It says,

...on the fifteenth day of the second month out of Egypt

In other words, 45 days after they left slavery and still in the desert

the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

This is a theme—the whole community grumbled.

<sup>3</sup> The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.' <sup>4</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. <sup>5</sup> 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.’  
[Exodus 16:1-5]

<sup>13</sup> That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. <sup>14</sup> When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. <sup>15</sup> When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was.

That literally is what manna means—what is this stuff?

Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat.’  
[Exodus 16:13-15]

Well, sure enough, some of the Israelites went out on the seventh day to gather manna, in spite of the instructions. But they didn’t find any.

<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. <sup>28</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? <sup>29</sup> Bear in mind that the Lord has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. [Exodus 16:27-29]

Well, the people of Israel called the bread manna—what is this stuff? It was white like coriander seed. It tasted awful, like vinegar...awful stuff. No, it says it tasted like wafers made with honey. As a matter of fact, Psalm 78 calls manna “angel’s food.” And the Israelites ate manna for forty years until they came to a settled land. They ate manna until they reached the border with Canaan, and then the manna stopped. What a great chapter, but it’s not the end of the story. And certainly it’s not the last time God took care of them, and certainly it’s not the last time they whined.

Now this will help you know the story of Moses if you realize that it is so big that part of the story of Moses happens in Deuteronomy—the laws that God gave Moses. And part of it happens in Numbers, where all the people who were involved are listed and some of the back story of what is happening in Exodus is told. And Numbers 10 and 11 it gives this same story from a different angle. It says,

<sup>4</sup> The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, “If only we had meat to eat! [Numbers 11:4]

What they are basically saying is *manna, manna, manna. More miracle food. Yuck.*”

There are between ten and thirteen different occasions, as their lives are being saved, that the Israelites all join together in grumbling and complaining. They are these people: *When are we going to get there? I have to pee. Are we there yet? I'm tired.*

What's the lesson for Moses? Well, the lesson for Moses is easy. If you want to have everybody like you, don't be a leader—sell ice cream. Moses is in the wrong job. But for the people there is a different lesson. Paul teaches the followers of Jesus lessons from the life of Moses. This is for us. When he talks to the church in Corinth, he says this,

<sup>1</sup> For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. [1 Corinthians 10:1]

Remember, a cloud led them by day and fire led them by night? They were under the cloud and all of them passed through the sea when the Red Sea was split. So all of those Israelites saw the power of God. They were saved. But it says in verse 5,

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them [1 Corinthians 10:5]

Their actions are examples for us—that we should not crave evil things like they craved. They were saved but they still craved evil things. Now in some senses they weren't evil, but they were in the past and they should stay in the past...they still craved Egyptian food, Egyptian music, Egyptian culture, Egyptian gods. It was stopping them from hearing the voice of God. I wonder if that ever happens to you? In verse 10 Paul says this about the Israelites:

<sup>10</sup> And do not grumble, as some of them did... [1 Corinthians 10:10]

These things are an example. They are written down to instruct us.

So I know this is one of those sermons where you think *oh, this is just so irrelevant to my life*. Because none of you have ever whined about anything. None of you have ever complained about anything. None of you have ever been dissatisfied or discontent in your life. If any of you are sitting within five feet of somebody who has ever complained, please look at them and do not raise your hand. We don't want to know. It's all of us—we are complainers. And if you are among the list of the grumblers, you need to see verse 12. In 1 Corinthians 10:12 Paul says,

<sup>12</sup> So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

Let the person who thinks *I know it; I know God...* let them take heed lest they fall. Apparently hanging on to the evil things and grumbling is spiritual nitroglycerin. It can kill you says the apostle Paul.

So in Exodus 16 and 17 it says God put His people through tests to move them forward. Three tests right? The first was the test of thirst. They went to Marah, and the text says when they came to Marah the water was bitter.

<sup>23</sup> When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. [Exodus 15:23]

And they complained. They spat it out. Sometimes life is bitter; every one of your lives will have bitter days.

We have a friend who came here this weekend for Telos [The Telos Group], a mission organization that we work with. He was talking about Israel and Palestine to some groups and yesterday as he was getting ready to do a video with Laura, his mother-in-law called to tell him that he and his wife's nephew was dead. His sister-in-law had walked into the bathroom that morning and found her 24 year old son—Todd's nephew—dead, another victim of these drugs that are killing us. Todd's day, Judy's day, is bitter. Their next season will be different because of this. All of you have had that. For some of you it's a class you hate. For some of you it's friends you can't get along with, for some of you it's a job that stinks, and for others of you it's a boss you can't trust. Life is filled with bitter, and you are crazy if you walk around saying, "Well, John said that we ought to say that this is good." It's not good, it's bitter. And you should say it's bitter. That first test is not *will I tell the truth? No, this is bitter*. The key is will bitterness make you bitter?

Some of us have lives that are marked by complaint. How many of you know people that always find something wrong with everything? We all know people who are grumblers, who are complainers, who aren't just glass half empty people, they are glass half cracked people. When you have a bitter day, the key is how will you handle the next time? Will you learn—through this bitter day—how to trust God, or that God will get you through it? Or that God weeps too...or will you go to the next time more ready to whine?

That's the second test. It's the test of time. Every life has to go into the desert again and again. And this says that on the fifteenth day of the second month—forty-five days out of Egypt, still in the desert—the whole community complained against Moses. They have not learned to trust. They have learned to complain. *Are we there yet? I have to pee. I'm tired. Can we go home now?* This is the one I think is so instructive for Edina, and Richfield, and Bloomington, and Minnetonka, and southwest Minneapolis...this is you. You complain about time for a couple of reasons. One, we live in an instant culture. It's supposed to happen right now and not only does it not get fixed right now, it doesn't get fixed the way you want it. It turns out different. You do not get the job. It turns out

different this time—she still breaks up with you. It turns out different—the son does not return home, but remains prodigal. And you haven't learned how to trust, but you've learned how to complain. And one of the ways we have learned that time is not on our side is when we start to say, "Oh, remember how good it used to be?" How many of you are good at the "used to be"? You're better in the rear view mirror than the front mirror. *Oh man, if I could just go back to high school again. If I could just do this again. If our culture was only like it was before we all started hating each other.* I have gotten this idea of thirst and time and hunger from Chuck Swindoll who has a wonderful book on Moses. And Swindoll says one of the temptations of people who are impatient with God's timing is that they become in love with a false past. You only remember the good times. Over and over the Jews say *Oh, remember how we used to eat there?* Yeah, you used to eat there, but they would whip you before dinner. *Oh, our family used to gather.* Yeah, but they stole your oldest son. We remember only the good times and we want that back. Swindoll has a great quote about this. He says, "People who focus on the past, it won't be long before the complains start oozing from their lips." Are you a complainer because the time is wrong?

It's thirst, it's time, and the one that we think of most often is hunger. God knows that we are hungry. He brings the Israelites into the desert and plans to feed them, but they cry out *You have brought us out into this desert to starve.* And so God says *No, here's the food.* And do they say *Oh, this is great?* No, they say *what is this stuff?* And then they say *I wish I had that, or I wish I had this.* Tell me if this is any of you: God comes through in some way for you and your reaction is *this is not what I expected. Or, this is not what I wanted. Or, this is not what others have.* Again, an American disease... *this is not what others have. God, you're being unfair.* And we complain instead of give thanks. When you give a whine you cannot give a praise. When you complain, you cannot trust at the same time.

I saw this when our kids were little—when Katie turned 10—I took her on a dads and daughters trip to Guatemala with World Vision. We stayed at this very nice hotel and the first day she loved swimming in the pool. The second day we went outside of the city and looked at the volcano, which was great. The third day we went to the city dump and she saw 10,000 people living in the dump and her life started to change. At the end of the week we drove up toward the volcano, out into the nowhere part of Guatemala to where World Vision had set up this little community, and they had not given the people chickens, they had loaned them chickens. They had loaned them goats, and with the profits they created a little greenhouse community. And they were so proud of it—it looked like a farm in the 1800's. They were so proud of it, and they wanted to have us for lunch. So we drove up to the leader's house and he was so proud of his tin roof. He said, "I wish you were here during the rain. You could hear the rain beating on the tin roof." We drove around to the back of the house and all these dads and

daughters got out and walked to the house. We see all these chicken feathers and chicken bones and chicken guts, and the kids are going *yuck!* We walk inside and there is this beautiful stew of chicken. The kids are like *whoa, we just saw the chicken guts outside...you mean chicken doesn't come out of plastic bags?* And the dads are trying to put a good face on it, and the little girls (10,11, 12 year old girls) are trying to be polite...*thank you, I'm not really hungry...* And Katie, my 10 year old, picks up a big spoon and takes a big bite and turns to the lady and says, "Muy bien!" Then she turns during the meal to me, and I wrote this down in my journal, and she said, "But dad, I probably shouldn't complain about not having as many tennis shoes as my friends, should I?" And I thought, this is the spirit of God, breaking in against the spirit of complaining. Now this is totally an unrealistic example, but out in Eden Prairie for a while the kids were all wearing different tennis shoes every day. That would never happen in Minnetonka or Edina, so I know that's not something you have to worry about, but what it told me was that it takes humility to learn. From the tests God gives us, it takes humility. God does not just want you to endure tests to learn, God wants you to learn humility. We are not a very humble people, but the proud do not learn. Proverbs 28 says, "Don't even bother to beat a fool, he won't learn from the beating." [Paraphrased] The fool is not humble, he is proud. You may be going into the wilderness tomorrow, even if you go 1,000 miles away, wherever you go, you take your Egyptian appetites with you. God is in the business—not just of bringing us through the Red Sea to salvation—God is in the business of giving us the Promised Land through the wilderness. What are you going to learn? Are you going to be like Moses and learn that if I don't want people to complain...I'll sell ice cream. But for the rest of us, I should learn from this story that God will provide. The God who heals is the God who provides—in God's time, in God's way, not mine. That God promises not comfort, He promises His presence. And God promises to change us through tests, so that at the end of the day we can trust and we can thank God. Our natural inclination, when we are in the desert, is to fear, to complain, to compare, and to blame. Fear and complaint and comparison and blame stunt our ability to see God at work. To trust God. It's rooted in fear because we forget that God will not leave us. God is testing you today. Good day, bad day, God is testing you, not because God needs to know the answer, but because you need to know that God is there, and God will not give up. And with a complaint on my lip or a whine in my heart, I need to stop and say, "God, where are you?" and give thanks to God.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon.  
Soli Deo Gloria.*