PENTECOST 18

Proper 21 - Year A

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Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of
the Israelites journeyed by stages, as
the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but
there was no water for the people to drink. [2] The
people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water
to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel
with me? Why do you test 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 shall
I do for this 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, so that the people may drink." Moses
did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. [7] He called
the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites
quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is
the Lord among us or not?"

Commentary from Tim Hamlin

Once again, the Israelites are complaining to Moses about their circumstances. In spite of the 10 plagues; in spite of their deliverance on the shores of the Red Sea; in spite of the manna and quails that God had recently rained down from heaven, the people of Israel are convinced that Moses has brought "[them] out of Egypt, to kill [them]." For Moses, this is not just a challenge to his leadership but a direct test of God's presence and surety; it is an unforgivable demonstration of doubt. Yet God exhibits great patience and demonstrates great power by providing the Israelites with a new source of water.

These Exodus stories from the wilderness of Sinai are a wonderful reminder of both the human instinct to stray and the divine instinct to forgive. One would think that after all that God had done for the Israelites, they would never doubt God's love and steadfastness; similarly, after all of their missteps, one would understand if God had had enough with the Israelites. Yet here are the people of Israel forgetting that God provides and here is God, loving these people and taking care of their needs.

Discussion Questions

How might you fail to notice God's love and care in your life?

What might be possible in your life if you took God's forgiveness for granted?

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

1 Hear my teaching, O my people; *
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
2 I will open my mouth in a parable; *
I will declare the mysteries of ancient times.
3 That which we have heard and known,
and what our forefathers have told us, *
we will not hide from their children.
4 We will recount to generations to come
the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the LORD, *
and the wonderful works he has done.
12 He worked marvels in the sight of their forefathers, *
in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.
13 He split open the sea and let them pass through; *
he made the waters stand up like walls.
14 He led them with a cloud by day, *
and all the night through with a glow of fire.
15 He split the hard rocks in the wilderness *
and gave them drink as from the great deep.
16 He brought streams out of the cliff, *
and the waters gushed out like rivers.

Commentary from Tim Hamlin

This psalm selection was chosen to coincide with the Exodus reading because of its obvious symmetry with the Torah passage. Psalm 78 is a historical psalm—one part focused on Israel's time in the wilderness and the other portion focused on the early years of the Israelites' time in Canaan. This psalm is a wonderful reminder of the wide diversity found in the Book of Psalms – from praise to lament to triumph to teaching. The psalms are never just one thing and Psalm 78 is a perfect example of that.

Discussion Questions

How do you think the importance of the psalms to our worship might change the way we think about and interact with God? How does the inherent diversity of this book affect our religious understanding?

Philippians 2:1-13

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any
consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit,
any tender affection and sympathy, [2] make my joy
complete: be of the same mind, having the same love,
being in full accord and of one mind. [3] Do nothing
from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in
humility regard others as better than yourselves. [4] Let
each of you look not to your own interests but to the
interests of others. [5] Let the same mind be in you that
was in Christ Jesus,

[6] who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
[7] but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
[8] he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

[9] Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,
[10] so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
[11] and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

[12] Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always
obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more
now in my absence, work on your own salvation with
fear and trembling, [13] for it is God who is at work in
you, enabling you both to will and to work for his
good pleasure.

Commentary from Tim Hamlin

Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is one of his more good-natured letters; Paul is proud and happy with the community and how they have been carrying on. This passage presents us with some of the specific advice that Paul has to offer the community: Be humble and generous. Paul explicitly connects these virtues with Jesus, describing how Jesus "emptied himself," even though he had every right to assert his divine dominance. Some scholars believe that verses 6-11 are actually quotations from a hymn that would have been familiar to both Paul and the Philippian church. In a world that continues to prize opulence, self-promotion, and expressions of power, this small passage is a valuable reminder of the virtues valued by the Early Church and how they were understood to be embodied in the story and life of Jesus.

Discussion Questions

What do you think it means for Jesus to "empty himself"? How might we, as Christians, emulate that?

What do you make of the paradox that by humbling himself, Jesus was exalted?

Matthew 21:23-32

[23] When he entered the temple, the chief priests and
the elders of the people came to him as he was
teaching and said, "By what authority are you doing
these things, and who gave you this
authority?" [24] Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you
one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will
also tell you by what authority I do these
things. [25] Did the baptism of John come from heaven,
or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one
another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us,
'Why, then, did you not believe him?' [26] But if we say,
'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd, for all
regard John as a prophet." [27] So they answered Jesus,
"We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither
will I tell you by what authority I am doing these
things.

[28] "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went
to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard
today.' [29] He answered, 'I will not,' but later he
changed his mind and went. [30] The father went to the
second and said the same, and he answered, 'I go, sir,'
but he did not go. [31] Which of the two did the will of
his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them,
"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes
are going into the kingdom of God ahead of
you. [32] For John came to you in the way of
righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the
tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him, and
even after you saw it you did not change your minds
and believe him.

Commentary from Tim Hamlin

This passage places us in Jerusalem in the days before Jesus' arrest and execution. Jesus has already entered the city in triumph and cleansed the Temple of its money changers and animal vendors. The Jewish leaders are trying to catch Jesus in a trap and approach him with this seemingly innocent query: By whose authority did he heal and teach? Of course, Jesus is too clever for the chief priests and the elders and turns the question back on them, stumping them when asking the same question about John the Baptist.

Jesus then clarifies who his ministry is for by telling a parable about two sons sent out into the fields to work. As illustrated by this story, it does not matter what a person says but rather what their actions are. The leaders in Jerusalem might have more power and prestige, but their actions fall short of what is desirable; they can talk the talk but do not always follow through. Jesus contrasts this with the "tax collectors and prostitutes" who are marred on the exterior but recognize their shortcomings and take action by seeking repentance from John the Baptist and, eventually, Jesus. They know that they need God, and they actively pursue God's love and care.

Discussion Questions

Does placing this story in the week before Jesus' death change how you receive it?

When in your life are you more like the chief priests and the elders? When are you more like the tax collectors?

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