PENTECOST 17

Proper 20 - Year A

*This Bible study was written by **Justin Smith** of **Virginia Theological Seminary**.*

Exodus 16:2-15

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
by the 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 am going to rain
bread from heaven for you, and each day the people
shall 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, when they
prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as
they gather on other days." 6 So Moses and Aaron said
to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know
that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land
of Egypt, 7 and in the morning you shall see the glory
of the Lord, because he 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 him—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: 'Draw near to the Lord,
for he has heard your complaining.' " 10 And as Aaron
spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they
looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of
the Lord appeared in the cloud. 11 The Lord spoke to
Moses, 12 "I have heard the complaining of the
Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat,
and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread;
then you shall 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, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to
eat.

Commentary from Justin Smith

At first glance, we might sympathize with the murmuring Israelites. After all, we need food to survive, and we have likely all been "hangry" once or twice. Yet the murmuring of the Israelites is not simply about their lack of food; it is also about their dissatisfaction with God. The Israelites expected deliverance from oppression to look more like leisurely provision and less like subsistence living. Therefore, in a startling reversal, Israel turns from God to look back longingly at their former lives in Egypt.

Having thus turned from God, it is noteworthy that, as Aaron speaks to them, the Israelites turn back toward the wilderness, where they behold the glory of God. The Hebrew word *kavod*, translated "glory," also denotes richness and abundance; and so, the glory of God, coming to the Israelites from the wilderness, is indeed accompanied by an abundant provision of quails and of the wondrous, grain-like substance called *manna*.

The message to the Israelites is clear: having delivered them, God will not leave them to die. God's glory manifests to them as abundance and generosity – even in the midst of the wilderness, even after their turning away from God. The message for us is similar. Our lives are marked by loss, uncertainty, and change. As we journey through these passing things, we are reminded that God remains with us always and everywhere, even in those times and places when God's presence seems particularly far from us. Our goal, with God's help, is to endure these passing hardships and keep our faces turned toward God who loves us and sustains us, even if that means turning from our personal places of comfort to seek God in the wilderness of life.

Discussion Questions

Have you felt the presence of God in a particularly difficult time?

What experiences of God help you in your journeys through life's wilderness?

How did you experience God's presence and provision then? Now?

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

1 Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name; *
make known his deeds among the peoples.
2 Sing to him, sing praises to him, *
and speak of all his marvelous works.
3 Glory in his holy Name; *
let the hearts of those who seek
the Lord rejoice.
4 Search for the Lord and his strength; *
continually seek his face.
5 Remember the marvels he has done, *
his wonders and the judgments of his mouth,
6 O offspring of Abraham his servant, *
O children of Jacob his chosen.
37 He led out his people with silver and gold; *
in all their tribes there was not one that
stumbled.
38 Egypt was glad of their going, *
because they were afraid of them.
39 He spread out a cloud for a covering *
and a fire to give light in the night season.
40 They asked, and quails appeared, *
and he satisfied them with bread from heaven.
41 He opened the rock, and water flowed, *
so the river ran in the dry places.
42 For God remembered his holy word *
and Abraham his servant.
43 So he led forth his people with gladness, *
his chosen with shouts of joy.
44 He gave his people the lands of the nations, *
and they took the fruit of others' toil,
45 That they might keep his statutes *
and observe his laws.
Hallelujah!

Commentary from Justin Smith

When reading the Bible, it is common to encounter the same story told in a different way – sometimes in stark contrast to a previous telling found in another book! The story of the manna from heaven, first related in Exodus 16, is thus encountered again in Psalm 105, where several key details of the story are either changed or omitted entirely.

The psalmist downplays the murmuring of the Israelites: "They asked, and quails appeared, / and he satisfied them with bread from heaven." The phrase "they asked" feels rather far removed from the opposition and tension of the Exodus narrative! Yet Psalm 105 was likely composed sometime around the end of the Babylonian Exile, so it makes sense that the psalmist would choose to downplay the negative in celebration of God's strong deliverance. Likewise, our own stories can morph and shift according to our mood and setting. A negative experience can later be seen as positive, and vice versa. The trick is to acknowledge when and why our stories might change, and to ask ourselves – are we telling our stories faithfully and knowingly, or are we bending the story to serve our interests?

Discussion Questions

Is there a story that is important to you or to your church?

What about that story stands out to you, or means the most to you?

Would someone else tell that story differently? Would you? If so, how?

Philippians 1:21-30

[21] For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. [22] If I
am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for
me, yet I cannot say which I will choose. [23] I am hard
pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and
be with Christ, for that is far better, [24] but to remain in
the flesh is more necessary for you. [25] Since I am
convinced of this, I know that I will remain and
continue with all of you for your progress and joy in
faith, [26] so that, by my presence again with you, your
boast might abound in Christ Jesus because of me.

[27] Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel
of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am
absent and hear about you, I will know that you are
standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with
one mind for the faith of the gospel [28] and in no way
frightened by those opposing you. For them, this is
evidence of their destruction but of your salvation.
And this is God's doing. [29] For he has graciously
granted you the privilege not only of believing in
Christ but of suffering for him as well, [30] since you are
having the same struggle that you saw I had and now
hear that I still have.

Commentary from Justin Smith

Paul believes that he will survive his present ordeal to see the Philippians again, but will that belief become a reality? That much remains unknown; and so, waiting to see whether he will live or die, the Philippians are caught in anxiety and uncertainty – a potential wilderness of the soul. What advice can Paul give to lead them through that wilderness?

Paul exhorts the Philippians to live "in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ." In fact, the Greek text more literally means "live as citizens," a phrase typically oriented toward Roman citizenship. Yet Paul does not mean Roman citizenry, but citizenry in the Kingdom of God. With this, Paul offers a subtle reminder to the Philippians that they are sojourners in this world - citizens of a Kingdom that they long for but do not yet see completely. Whatever happens to Paul, they know what to do: continue living as citizens of that Kingdom.

This is Paul's advice to us as well, though we may never face imprisonment for our faith as he did. We know what it feels like to live in a state of anxious uncertainty, waiting to discover how things will unfold. Will we make it through the wilderness of our own experience? Yes, says Paul, because we also are citizens of God's Kingdom, and we know that the light of resurrection and restoration lies just beyond the darkness of the tomb. Clinging to that faith, we can survive and strive together, whatever might come our way.

Discussion Questions

Is there a time when you experienced anxiety and uncertainty?

Did your faith help you through that time? If so, how? If not, why not?

What advice would you give to a parishioner feeling anxious and uncertain?

Matthew 20:1-16

20 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner
who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for
his vineyard. [2] After agreeing with the laborers for a
denarius for the day, he sent them into his
vineyard. [3] When he went out about nine o'clock, he
saw others standing idle in the marketplace, [4] and he
said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will
pay you whatever is right.' So they went. [5] When he
went out again about noon and about three o'clock,
he did the same. [6] And about five o'clock he went out
and found others standing around, and he said to
them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' [7] They
said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to
them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' [8] When evening
came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager,
'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning
with the last and then going to the first.' [9] When those
hired about five o'clock came, each of them received
a denarius. [10] Now when the first came, they thought
they would receive more; but each of them also
received a denarius. [11] And when they received it, they
grumbled against the landowner, [12] saying, 'These last
worked only one hour, and you have made them
equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and
the scorching heat.' [13] But he replied to one of them,
'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree
with me for a denarius? [14] Take what belongs to you
and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give
to you. [15] Am I not allowed to do what I choose with
what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am
generous?' [16] So the last will be first, and the first will
be last."

Commentary from Justin Smith

Justice and generosity are major themes in today's Gospel. In the parable, a landowner hires laborers to work his vineyard. At day's end, the workers are paid. All is well until the first laborers realize that they have been paid the same amount as those hired later. The landowner's response is baffling: he can do what he wants with what he owns, so the laborers should not be envious of his generosity. That may be true, but is it just? The laborers think not, but what if the landowner had acted justly according to the laborers? Those hired later (idle only because no one else had hired them) would have earned a lesser sum, presumably through no fault of their own. Is that justice? The parable suggests not.

The primary characteristic of the landowner is not justice *per se*, but generosity – the landlord is generous, and that generosity feels unjust to some. But what if the landowner's generosity *is* justice? What if that generosity, shared with everyone, is a symbol of a new way of life – a way of love, even – and an invitation to walk that way? What if the laborers, quite unknowingly, have bought into a system that is itself unjust; a system which enacts oppression in the name of fairness and too often conflates our worth with our work?

If that is true, and if we take the landowner to be God (as the parable seems to imply), then perhaps God's justice is rather like this extreme form of generosity that stubbornly resists the perpetuation of unjust systems. Perhaps it is our unjust world, built on the want of more and the fear of less, which has taught us that unwarranted generosity is unjust. This is likely little consolation for the offended laborers, or for those offended by this parable today; but perhaps, if we substitute "gracious" for "generous," the picture will become clearer. God's justice is God's generosity, which is God's grace – and it is that grace, given freely and equally to all without warrant or claim, which defines God's Kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

Discussion Questions

Do you think the landowner acted justly or unjustly? Why?

Do you agree that God's generosity defines God's justice? Why or why not?

What does the phrase, "The last will be first and the first will be last," mean to you?

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