

Proper 21, Year A

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

For the past many weeks
we have been on an Old Testament journey,
tracking along through the book of Exodus
and the great story of Moses
and the people of God.

It started back in August
when we read how a baby named Moses
was born to a poor Hebrew slave woman,
placed in a basket, and sent up the river
in the hopes of giving him a better life.

Then we read how Moses grew up
and one day, while shepherding his father-in-law's flocks,
he saw a burning bush in the wilderness
where God spoke to him and said,
“**מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה אָנֹה אָנֹה!**”

“Moses! Moses! I AM that I AM!
I am the God of your fathers,
the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
Go and save my people!”

And here lately over the past few weeks,
we've read how God used Moses to do exactly that:
how he rescued his people from Pharaoh;
how they crossed the Red Sea and began life anew;
how God gave them bread from heaven
while they wandered in the wilderness.

You read the chapters of this epic story—
you walk right there with them,
with God and God's people—
and you might be inclined to hope or think
that from this point forward,
everything will be perfect.

God will provide, right?
The people will trust, right?
And before you know it,

Israel will be delivered safely and easily
to the Promised Land
to live out the rest of their days
with milk and honey,
peace and harmony,
feasting off the fat of the land.

And Moses?
Why, he'll take an early retirement,
draw on his 401k,
and live out the rest of his days
fat, happy, and dumb.

But that's not how it goes.
It rarely ever is.

* * *

So today we pick up with the Israelites
and find that all is *not* perfect.

They are still in the desert.
They've been walking for weeks.
And they are *thirsty*.

Therefore, they do what we all would do:
they complain, cry out, and say,
“Moses! Moses! Why did you bring us out of Egypt,
to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

How easy it is to read these words
with centuries of hindsight and spiritual smugness.
It's easy to say, “There they go again.
There go those Israelites, always complaining.
Don't they know that if they would just
shut their mouths and trust in God,
all would be well?”

But after watching what's happening
in Puerto Rico since Hurricane Maria—
after seeing the humanitarian crisis that unfolds
when an entire nation has no water—
you realize that this isn't just complaining.
This is desperation against the very real threat of death.

And so Moses does what he always does:

he goes to God and says, “Lord, we need you.”
“Lord,” he says, “You have brought us out here for a reason,
and I know you have not brought us this far
just to drop us now.
What are we going to do, O Lord?
What are *you* going to do, O Lord?”

And God says,
“I hear you, Moses.
Do you see that rock over there?
Go hit it, Moses. Go hit it with your staff,
and I promise, water will come forth.
Water enough for you.
Water enough for the people.
Water enough for all.
I know the people are asking,
‘Is the Lord among us or not?’
but let me assure you, Moses:
I AM . . . right here.”

* * *

It is easy to wonder
“Is the Lord among us or not?”
when things do not go as we thought they would . . .
when things don’t turn out perfectly . . .
when it doesn’t all go according to plan.

And yet, what we find over, and over, and over
is that it’s actually in the *imperfections*
that God tends to show himself most clearly.

It’s in the unexpected,
the derailments,
the undoing
of our best-laid plans.

It’s in those moments
when we are so sure
that everything will fall apart,
that our God arrives on the scene
and shows us how he—
and he alone—
can make all things fall *together*.

* * *

We know something of this here at St. Anne's.

Over this past week you received a letter from me and from our Senior Warden Mike Collier letting you know that, due to budgetary reasons, our Assistant Rector the Rev. Ellen Richardson will be leaving us at the end of October.

This is a decision that
Ellen and I discerned together,
mutually and collegially,
with love for one another
and for y'all.

The simple fact is that our parish remains at a significant deficit this year, and a budgetary intervention is necessary. Staff is the only area we can cut.

She and I want you to know we have a peace about all of this. And I want to be clear about a few other things.

Number one:
Our deficit is not due to any significant lack of giving.
Yes, some households are behind—
and as we have said lately, that *does* make a difference—
but there has not been any precipitous decline in giving.
In fact, overall, your giving is *up*.
You have been so generous this year,
and I am so proud of you.

Number two:
Our deficit is not due to overspending.
Your church staff and core volunteers
have worked hard all year—and every year—
to keep our expenditures well under budget.
We do run a tight ship.

Number three:
Our deficit is not due to the mortgage
on the Ministry Center . . .
at least not yet.
Right now, there are still enough building pledges coming in
to cover the cost of the mortgage,
though that won't last forever.

No, our deficit is due to one thing.
Six years ago we looked around.
We saw how we were growing and changing,
and we realized we needed additional staff.
And so, like the children of Israel before us,
we stepped forward.

For the first two years, the Diocese assisted us
with supplemental income to get us started,
for which we were very grateful.
And after that, between several strategic reserves
and an occasional, unexpected major gift,
we were able to bridge the gap each year
between what we needed and what your giving could afford.

This was intentional.
Your Vestry and your Finance Committee *knew*
that those reserves would not last forever.
Their vision and their hope was
that as those reserves came down,
St. Anne's overall giving would increase,
and the two would meet perfectly in the middle.
We'd pass from subsidization to self-sufficiency,
and we'd never ever even feel a pinch . . .
or so we hoped.

Well, this is the year when we felt the pinch.

As I've said to several folks over the past week,
if we always think everything is going to work out perfectly—
if we always think we'll make it from Egypt to the Promised Land
without a single hitch,
without a single challenge,
without a single "Lord, are you with us or not?"—
then we're probably not reading our Bibles well.

And yet, look what has happened!
Look around you at what God has done over the past several years.
With the help of Rev. Ellen, and you, and so many others,
look at what's happened in the life of this church.

Our church is thriving.
Our ministries are growing.
We're doing more outreach and mission than ever before.
We have 50 to 60 kids on our campus every Wednesday night.

Our average attendance is higher than it has been in three years.
Our worship schedule with two services
is doing exactly what we had hoped it would do.
We've made room, and new members continue to stumble in
and find in us the church home they always needed
but never knew existed.

And I am here to tell you . . .
so much of this would have been downright impossible
without Rev. Ellen these past three-and-a-half years.
How blessed we are to have had her and Mark with us.
Ellen has pushed us and loved us,
organized and trained us,
challenged and changed us . . .
and we will never be the same.

* * *

So what happens now?
Well, I'll leave it to Rev. Ellen and to Mark
to share with you their discernments
about their future.

Meanwhile, you need to know that
their last Sunday with us will be October 29.
Come prepared to love on them and to celebrate them
for their years of ministry here at St. Anne's.

Meanwhile, you and I will have our work cut out for us.
We are no longer a one-rector church,
and the complexity of our life and ministries here
is far greater than any one priest can manage alone.

But here's the good news:
I have seen what you are capable of.
You are phenomenal ministers in your own right,
and this isn't the first time you've had to dig in
and get your hands dirty.

As one parishioner reminded me last week,
“You know Fr. Lonnie, before you came
we had to learn how to run this place ourselves.
We know how to dig in. We can do it again.”

Since the news broke, some of you have asked,
“Does this mean the end of our current worship schedule?
Two services seem like a lot for one priest to handle.”

I appreciate your concern, but no.
Our worship schedule is doing exactly
what we hoped it would in terms of growth,
and the truth is we'll need to continue to grow
if we want to reach true self-sustainability.

Two services per Sunday isn't the hard part for a single priest.
(Priests across the globe say multiples Masses every day.)
It's the stuff *between* Sundays:
all the oversight, coordination, and administration,
all the planning and communication with various ministries,
all the cultivation and training of leadership,
all the vision casting and priority setting,
all the pastoral care and visitations that must be made.
That's the hard part.

For the time being, you will have to take on much of that.
I will place my focus on those things that only a priest can do—
the Sacraments, the preaching, the acute crisis pastoral care—
and the rest will be up to you.

In the Gospel today, Jesus asks,
“Who does the will of the Father?
The one who *says* he will,
or the one who *sacrifices, acts, and gives?*”
The answer is clear, and the time has come.
It's time to sacrifice, act, and give.

* * *

In some ways it seems like a happy accident
that we've ended up making the trek with Israel
in our readings these past several months.
Honestly, it's just how the lectionary fell.

But don't you know?
Don't you know, O St. Anne's,
that there are no accidents
when it comes to God?

Don't you know, O St. Anne's,
that you and I *are* Israel,
the pilgrim people of God
making our way by stages
to and through the places where God leads?

And most importantly,
don't you know, O St. Anne's,
that the Lord is our God?

For as long as we live,
life will continue to twist, and change, and challenge,
but our God is faithful and mighty,
and he has not brought us this far
just to drop us now.

After all,
it's always right when we are so sure
that everything will fall apart,
that our God arrives on the scene
and shows us how he—
and he alone—
can make all things fall together.

Amen.