

Today's Scripture is a story of God's providence and grace. Did you know that you live in the providence of God? You also live in Providence Presbytery. When the southern Presbyterian Church reunited with the northern Presbyterian Church in the early 80s, our Presbytery was renamed from Bethel Presbytery to Providence presbytery. A committee was formed to come up with a name and came to the inaugural presbytery meeting to announce the new name. The only problem was they had no name to present. Someone stood on the floor of Presbytery and suggested naming us the LUCKY presbytery since we represent Lancaster, Union, Chester, Kershaw and York counties! Pretty clever...but Jerry Hammett, pastor of the Bethesda Camden church stood up and said, "Mr. Moderator, we are Presbyterians and we do not believe in luck; we believe in providence." And we were named Providence Presbytery that day. So you live in Providence Presbytery as well as in the providence of God.

Well, we find the children of Israel today wandering around in the wilderness. They are betwixt and between. Like teenagers with a new driver's permit and car keys in hand, they are learning about freedom. The Hebrew people are no longer slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, they have a new kind of freedom, and they are learning what it means to be free. It is a time betwixt and between – they are teenagers on their way to Canaan land – a land flowing with milk and honey. But they are not there yet. And like any road trip, there are joys and annoyances.

We left off last week with Moses and Miriam's song after the Children of Israel passed through the Reed Sea to the other side of freedom. You have to remember the Hebrew people had been slaves under a harsh rule for hundreds of years. They had endured the slaughter of their male children, the unjust work of making bricks for Pharaoh, the demoralizing fear of their masters. Following the plagues and the Passover, they set out to leave slavery. And like any good teenager who makes it to the other side of freedom, they have a party. I imagine the celebration on the other side of slavery to be somewhat like a huge bonfire after winning the big game. They chant and dance, the women and Miriam break out their tambourines, and they are having a great time. Then reality sets in: they are no longer back in Egypt, but not yet to the Promised Land. What do you do when you are no longer where you were and not yet where you are going?

Being betwixt and between is an exciting and anxious time. Ask any teenager. You are not what you were, and you are still becoming what you will be. Transition is like that.

Anyone who has moved jobs, schools, locations, raised children who grow up, been children growing up, all know that about transition. Countries know about transition and change. Countries wrecked by war, and seeking to live in a new structure of democracy or freedom, know that transition is painful. And some fall back right into the patterns of their old ways, because it is how they lived for hundreds of years. Look at Russia and the former Soviet territories.

We as a church are in transition – betwixt and between. Some of that has to do with searching for an installed pastor, but much change has to do with the fact that the world we live in today does not look like our grandparents' world. Our world has become so interconnected, in some cities; you can place your fast food order at the menu sign to a person in India, and drive around the corner to pick it up from the window from a local person. Our patterns have changed. Extended families do not live on the same

family land for generations. Many of our children grow up, perhaps go to college, and move to pursue a career which likely means moving away from home. Our lifestyles have changed. When we are not working 60 hour weeks and commuting to work, we cannot wait to get away for a weekend. And many have the financial means that earlier generations did not to do so. Most families have to have two working parents to survive. The unpaid staff of non-working women has almost dried up, but we still think we can do all the things we have always done before as a church. Our church is in transition because our culture and world is changing so rapidly. We are a people betwixt and between.

The Hebrew people are in the wilderness on a 40 year hiking trip to the Promised Land. And like any trip the moaning and groaning have begun. “Are we there yet?” “I gotta go!” “She’s touching me!” Maybe you’ve been on a trip like that.

First, they have no water – a valid concern – and God provides water. Now they are hungry and complaining. Who can blame them? But they are only days into this journey and it will be a long 40 years! Moses and Aaron, as leaders, might as well get used to this crowd. And here it comes – the complaints and whining...

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 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 fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Sound like any whining you have heard? First comes the blame. “This is all your fault! You brought us here (forget the fact that we followed you), and we could be eating all the bread we want back in Egypt.” Oh how we romanticize the past. We have selective memories. We remember the past as being better – the farther away we are from it.

The congregation of Israel is like the young adult who cannot wait to get out of the house and then realizes living at home wasn’t that bad, in fact it was really nice to have food in the frig and the comfort of the familiar. But parents know that their job is to raise children to learn how to be responsible with their freedom. We know that the child who is given everything and never has to struggle is the worse off for it. God is a good and loving parent, who raises us to be responsible with our freedom, too. In Exodus 16:4, God tells Moses that he will rain down bread from heaven, and each day the people will go out and gather enough for that day. In this way the congregation is being tested as to whether they will follow his instruction or not. They are not told to harvest the manna, or food from heaven, and store it in silos for the winter. In fact they could not; manna is a sticky sweet substance. I imagine it tastes like those packs of sweet goo that runners and bikers eat as they perform their race. But manna does not keep and would spoil after a day. They are told to take enough for one day. If anyone took more than their share, it would disappear. In this way, they cannot control their food supply and feel independent of God and God’s creation each day. That also means that no one could be greedy so that everyone could eat. The daily need to rely on God for nourishment feeds a strong dependence and trust in God.

Have you pondered the notion of enough? The reality that so many times we have had enough, but we focus on what is lacking. As a friend of mine says, “I grew up having everything I needed and some of what I wanted.” I am so grateful that I can say that as well. A big part of that is because of my mother, who at the age of 47 was a widow left to raise two children. Life was not always easy for my mother,

but she always persevered and was grateful. When she died I found this poem clipped from a magazine which she had saved for years. It summed up her life very nicely. The pastor shared it at her funeral.

“Steadfast Heart” (author unknown)

*I've dreamed many dreams that never came true, I've seen them vanish at dawn,
but I've realized enough of my dreams, thank God, to make me want to dream on.*

*I've prayed many prayers when no answer came, though I waited patient and long,
but answers have come to enough of my prayers to make me keep praying on.*

*I've trusted many a friend that failed, and left me to weep alone,
but I've found enough of my friends true blue to make me keep trusting on.*

*I've sown many seeds that fell by the way for the birds to feed on,
but I've held enough golden sheaves in my hands to make me keep sowing on.*

*I've drained the cup of disappointment and pain and gone many ways without song,
but I've sipped enough nectar from the roses of life to make me want to live on.*

All we need is enough...

This poem reminds us of the difficulty of living betwixt and between,
living in the wilderness,
living here in this time between the goodness and difficulty of human
experience even as we wait and hope and trust in the
fullness of heaven.

**At the same time, we learn that having enough is plenty.
That is the providence of God.**

I wonder sometimes if one benefit of the good ol' days was a stronger connection to the land which feeds us and the God who created it good. Many children today have never seen the miraculous connection of tilling, growing, and praying for rain and sun so that one might eat. Some of us think it all miraculously appears on grocery store shelves. We are sustained daily by the global food industry which provides strawberries in December. Does this make us less connected to our neighbors who grow food? Less connected to the land, creatures, and even to God himself? I think it might.

I just started reading Barbara Kingsolver's book, Animal, Vegetable, Miracle which is about an experiment her family tried. For one year, they try to grow and eat everything they can or they get what they need from local farmers. In some ways she describes it as a spiritual journey to reconnect with God, the family, and their neighbors. In effect, to love God and to love neighbors as we love ourselves. Their family learned to wait for things to grow in a world that says you can have it now and have it your way. It was a journey to rely on the land and rain, and to work as a partner with God in the creative process of growing food. Kingsolver describes the benefits that go way beyond good eating, it made her thankful! Or as the saying goes, "Count your blessings."

In the Scripture today, the leadership, Aaron and Moses, speak to the people to calm their fears. First they remind them that God has heard their cries and responds. They also make sure the people know that they need to lodge their complaints with God and not aim them at Aaron and Moses. (I feel that way sometimes, when a church member goes off attacking an elder, deacon or volunteer about

something in the church as if it is all his/her fault when I know the leadership of this church is working hard and many are sacrificing so much to do the right thing and lead our church. It goes to show the more things change the more things stay the same.) Then Aaron speaks to the people and reminds them of their first priority, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard you.” Drawing near to the Lord, is our first priority – draw near in worship, study, reflection and prayer. Draw near, connect to God, speak to God, even your complaints, and then work to care for the daily needs so that each one has enough. This is how you live betwixt and between, you draw near to God, learn to trust God, and are filled with enough of what you need. And in doing so, you discover that enough is plenty. God’s providence is like that.

One of the benefits of worshipping regularly is that the Scriptures, prayers and hymns begin to live in you. They just take up residence in your soul and decide to set up housekeeping. As I read this passage, I kept singing an old hymn that filled me up like manna. Sing it with me if you know it...

SING: Great is Thy Faithfulness Chorus

Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness,

Morning by morning, new mercies I see.

All I have needed thy hand hath provided.

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.

All I have needed thy hand hath provided. I hope you can look back and claim that promise. I hope you can claim and believe it about your future, the future of this church, and God’s creation. I also pray that each evening this week you will take a few minutes to consider those “Manna Moments” where you have had enough and been filled with good things. Pause at each meal and reflect on the food you have to eat. Count those Manna Moments and be thankful. Draw near to God and receive those gifts of God’s providence. I hope you realize that enough is more than enough – it is plenty!