Springfield Presbyterian Church

August 4th, 2024

Manna in the Wilderness

1. Continuing Themes

Last week, we spoke about finding abundance in scarcity, or

perceived scarcity. We declared that God does provide in ways that we cannot even begin to imagine or dream of with our human minds. As we enter this week, the theme follows as we hear from our narrative of Moses in Exodus.

Moses’ story is one of my favorites. If you want a good and thoughtful read, I recommend Nora Zeale Hurston’s Moses and that narrative she offers. He’s a fascinating guy – a Hebrew who was drifted down the river to the Pharoah, who would go off and try to live a normal life with his wife and children until the Lord called. Moses, like a lot of other prophets, was hesitant, if not emboldened. He told the Lord he had a stutter, he needed Aaron – and we hear that familiar cry of, “Please choose someone else.”

Yet Moses follows the call. So I imagine Moses in this scene both understanding the Hebrew’s frustration of being hungry but also acknowledging his own frustration at being a leader in this time and place. The people are ultimately saying to him, “You brought us into the wilderness, you claimed by God that there would be a Promised Land – but here we are, worse off than we were before. We might as well have remained as servants or died in Egypt.” And Moses does the right thing, he relies on God when all seems lost. Then manna falls from Heaven, again, the food that is scarce is now abundant, and the people can eat and be eased by the provision God has made.

Something I often reflect upon in the narrative of Moses is this journey in the wilderness and the hope of the Promised Land. Often, it is tempting to focus on the fact that the Hebrews would make it there – they made it to the promised land after 40 years in the wilderness. That is something to absolutely rejoice in and be humbled by. But, for me, here’s the reality that is important to remember: Moses never made it to the Promised Land.

And it’s complicated. Moses had sinned. Moses sinned before the journey as he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave, though one might argue that he was seeking to protect others. In Numbers, we are told that Moses and Aaron were not allowed into the Promised Land, “because they did not show faith in sanctifying God in the sight of Israel’s children, therefore, they shall not bring this community to the land that God has promised them.” Moses died on Mount Nebo at the age of 120, with a line of sight into the Promised Land.

This narrative fascinates me. Moses has both glorified God and has sought to diminish God’s glory. It reminds me of many truths – first - even when we sin, God will still show up and call us to do powerful and beautiful things, not because it was acceptable to sin, but because grace is more important.

Second – sometimes our sin, our call, our circumstances may mean that we seek to lead people to the Promised Land of sorts – but we may not get to see it for ourselves. Let me actually expand on that in practical terms. What I mean, for example, is that there are times in our lives where we may proclaim God, show God’s kindness and mercy and not see the conclusion of that work. We have to trust that what we do is important, even when we do not see the result. If I preach a sermon here and someone shows up once and never comes back, I pray that though I may not see them again, that perhaps something resonated with them. We do good work, not for our glory, but for God’s glory, trusting that God’s will will indeed be done.

Third, Moses is not ultimately that different from many of his prophet peers. This is a normative trend – God calls and it’s a difficult mission to fulfill, perhaps that’s why when Jesus gives his call, we call it the Great Commission. It is not the easy commission, it is not the simple commission – it is great, powerful, hard, and an awesome commission. As humans, it often overwhelms us, we deem it too difficult – but God’s Spirit continues to nudge, and nudge, and nudge, and as we see in all of our prophet narratives – the Spirit always gets through.

So, in brief – the gleanings here are: God will provide abundance in scarcity, God calls us even if we don’t feel compelled to follow, God is merciful but also holds us accountable, and God’s glory will always be shown whether we see it or not. For us – these learnings are manna from heaven – they are the words we need to hear in this time and place. They are the things we need to hold onto even when we reside in wilderness spaces. God’s nourishment will always be faithful – God will always provide for our whole selves: body, mind, and spirit.

1. Gospel

As we hear our Gospel story this morning, there are plenty of

complex metaphors here that Jesus draws on as he speaks to the people. It would take a dissertation to emphasize them all, so, I will try to be succinct, but provide helpful insight.

Jesus and the people both point back to the history they know well – the history of the Torah, where the people were fed in the wilderness. The people want a sign, they want a tangible sign that this is God. It seems they want that image that their ancestors had – loaves falling from the sky. Yet, Jesus says they’ve had their fill, they have Jesus right in front of them. They’ve seen his healing works, they’ve seen him provide abundance – what else do they need?

And I swiftly remember in my judgment of these people in the narrative that I have the privilege of living a post-Easter life. I know the death and the resurrection – these people do not yet know. They know a Messiah is coming, but they are in the mess of figuring out what this means. Hindsight is 20/20 – and I have to give these onlookers in John some grace because it’s hard to see what is going on right in front of you sometimes.

Jesus’s grace abounds. He tells them that it was not Moses who fed them, but it was God. He tells them now that he, Jesus, is the bread that God is giving them this day. That must have been so confusing and confounding to hear. Yet, he promises abundance – as he proclaims, “whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus speaks in metaphor, the people are baffled, and even today, these are hard words to comprehend. But we trust still in the provision that God makes, both in the Old Testament and in the Gospel today, that as disciples, we will never be hungry or thirst again like our ancestors long, long ago.

1. What I do know

What I profoundly know, is that the meal we share this morning

is manna from Heaven in the wilderness of our lives and our world. We are living in the wilderness, friends. It may not look like Moses’ wilderness with the Hebrews, and it may not look like the wilderness of the people who are trying to figure out who Jesus is to them. Yet, we live in wilderness all the same. Maybe you feel the wilderness in your personal life – times where relationships are not reconciled, or you aren’t sure what will come next with work, or you wonder if the vision you had for your life will come into frame. Those are places of deep wilderness – places where the clouds cover our eyes as we seek clarity, and wilderness where we trust in God’s abundance while sitting in our own human frustration.

There’s also the wilderness of our world. Name it. Whether it is the political climate, the violence in the streets, the wars we see abroad, and so on. We live in a collective wilderness, where we pray that God’s will shall be done, in earth as it is in heaven. We pray that God’s peace will reign, even where it feels impossible. We pray for that promised land, for that manna that will nourish us, mind, body, and spirit, to be Christ’s disciples in the world as dreamers, as peace-keepers, as justice-bearers.

And the good news is - in this moment, as we come to the table, we get a taste of that manna. We take a breath, we feel the wilderness, but even if it’s just for a moment, we taste Heaven. We, alongside so many other congregations this morning, come to this table because we believe that God is still at work in the wilderness, that God still feeds his people, and that this table is long and wide, able to provide abundance even when it looks scarce.

So, with all these learnings, with all these wonderings – let us come to the table, compelled by the narratives we hear today, to trust that manna is still among us. The bread is here, the wine is present – God’s promise to provide still remains, here today, here in this place. So come, be fed, be nourished, like people from long ago, to this very moment here today. Come and taste manna from Heaven, in the midst of wilderness, and know that God’s love and promises from our ancestors are still ours today. Come, be fed – body, mind, and spirit. Alleluia and amen.