

August 2, 2009 – Lectionary 18
Andrew Tyrrell

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Psalm 78:23-29

Ephesians 4:1-16

John 6:24-35

God's people, the Israelites have grown restless. In our Old Testament reading for today we are told that God's people are feeling unfilled in the wilderness. They found themselves in this wilderness because they experienced oppression under the rule of the Egyptian Pharaoh and God saw their pain and decided to free them. But, after a mere few months of being freed, they fear that they will starve to death and they are wishing that they were back in Egypt. Really? They wish they were back in Egypt? In Egypt they were Pharaoh's slaves and were mistreated horribly. They had been liberated from Pharaoh by the one true God and now they wanted to go back to slavery. It's worth asking why? Why would a group of people want to move from freedom back into slavery? It's a question that's worth asking and perhaps a question that still applies to us today.

You see, as Christians we feel that sometimes we are living out a similar situation. We believe and are called to spread this truth that Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death, and that he has freed all people from sin in this life and the next. We believe this idea so strongly that we try to build our entire lives around this reality. We try to instill certain beliefs into our personal lives, as well as the world, because we believe in this idea that Christ has freed. But despite this belief, we still feel like we experience sin and tragedy on a frequent basis. We, like the people in Moses' story, have been freed by God but still feel like we are out in the wilderness...starving. We think, "Okay, there was a time where I felt a sense of liberation, a sense of freedom, but now I feel kind of the same as I did before...I think I'd like to go back to my personal habits that maybe weren't so positive. My addictions, my compulsions and, like the Israelites, my sense of slavery." Not because slavery is so great, but because it's familiar. And although it's not always pleasant, at least I don't always feel lost.

As most of you know, I am currently in seminary studying to be a pastor and, while seminary has been one of the greatest blessings of my life, my first year presented me with some profound challenges. You see I began to feel the call to become a pastor about halfway through college and so, by the time I applied, was accepted and arrived at seminary, I was ready to go. I was passionate about God and I believed that seminary would be a wonderful place in which everyday I felt rejuvenated and that everything would be one great joy after the next. But during the first week I ran into an older student named Adam who showing me around the campus and he pointed to one of the local health clubs. Adam told me that it might be a good idea for me to join the club because I will need to de-stress once classes start rolling. I thought to myself, "de-

stress...seminary should be awesome...I've been waiting for this for years...what should there be to de-stress about."

But after a few months I found that, while seminary was all the wonderful things I thought it would be...there were still problems and challenges like there were at any other point in my life. I found myself facing deadlines and tests like at any other school and was also hours away from my girlfriend who I knew I wanted to marry. I sometimes got frustrated with God and said to him, "God, I'm ready to be a pastor now...I've been in school my whole life...why do I have to go to four more years of school?" Being a first year student, all the tasks and responsibilities that I would have to complete over the next four years seemed very overwhelming.

When we read the scriptures, we are told that God had His people spend forty years in the desert. Forty years...doesn't that seem a bit excessive? I'm sure that God could have made the journey much shorter than that...say a week. Why would God put His people through forty years of conflict before they reached the

promised land?

I recently came across footage of the "Ironman Triathlon" on television. The Ironman is considered to be one of the most grueling and physically difficult undertakings for any individual. The race begins with a swim that is two-and-a-half miles long, followed by a bike ride that is 112 miles long, and ends with a marathon that is 26.2 miles. Each of these are to be done without a break. I tuned in towards the end of the program and so I was only able to see the end of the race. But the mixture of relief, joy, and accomplishment that these people felt was something that I'd never seen on another human being's face. Each person was different – some were professionals, some were not, and one person, if you can believe it, didn't even have legs. But this unique and universal feeling, when they crossed the finish line, was only made possible because of all the work they had put into it. All the experiences they had built up during and training for the race. Because the journey to the finish line was so hard, it made the end that much more worthwhile. While many people saw the victory of this race at the finish line, the real victory was made during the race and during all their training.

The great creative writing instructor Robert McKee puts it this way, he says "Joy is what you feel when the conflict is over. But it's that conflict that changes a person." You see God knows his people wanted to reach the promised land as quickly as possible...God knew that I didn't want to wait four years to be a pastor. But God also knew that the promised land wouldn't mean anything without a desert; that without that suffering, it would just be another place they lived, not a place they deeply appreciated. What I've realized after two years is that all the tests, the internships, the people I meet while in seminary...they all mean something. They are all part of that pastoral identity I will eventually have.

You see, we all have periods in our lives that feel like our desert, our wilderness, that cause us to hunger for something more in life and, in time, God will feed us. Christ will feed us like our story today when the crowds gathered around him, hungry with nothing to eat. But how can Christ feed us if we are already full. I believe that each one of us has a unique aching for God,

we miss God when we don't feel his presence, the same way we miss a loved one when they are far away. We feel this emptiness and we are tempted to fill it with something... even if it's not positive. But how much more meaningful is it when we finally are reunited with that loved one.

So what do we do in the meantime...what do we do when we feel like we are in deserts? I'm reminded by the great explorers we all studied when we were kids. They were able to cross thousands of miles of ocean with no technology. When they couldn't see the shore and all around them was water they looked to the stars. No matter what happened, the stars were unwavering, constant. God puts stars in our lives as well. One of them is this table. When we come and take this bread and wine, we are reminded that, whether we are at our highest or at our lowest, we have a God that loves us and cares for us. We have a Christ that sacrificed himself to save us from a permanent desert. That while there are deserts all around us, there are stars as well. There are times in our life where we'll feel like the disciples. We'll feel hungry, or lost, or unfilled. But Jesus steadies us and provides us constant reminders that he is with us, forming us as we walk through our deserts and storms, until one day, we return home with him permanently. Amen.