

Sunday September 28, 2014

The reading this morning takes place shortly after the Israelites have left Egypt and began their journey to the Promised Land. The events related in this particular reading occur before Moses and the people reach Mount Sinai, where they spend a great deal of time and are given the covenant with God. The time at Sinai actually comprises about 1/3 of the first 5 books of the Old Testament, the Jewish Torah. The site of this story has two names, Massah and Meribah, which are understood in the story as meaning “testing place” and “quarreling” respectively. This is one of many stories where the Israelites seem to question Moses and test God. One of these times, from Numbers chapter 20 explains why Moses and Aaron did not eventually enter the Promised Land.

Exodus 17: 1-7

¹Directed by GOD, the whole company of Israel moved on by stages from the Wilderness of Sin. They set camp at Rephidim. And there wasn't a drop of water for the people to drink. ²The people took Moses to task: “Give us water to drink.” But Moses said, “Why pester me? Why are you testing GOD?”

³But the people were thirsty for water there. They complained to Moses, “Why did you take us from Egypt and drag us out here with our children and animals to die of thirst?”

⁴Moses cried out in prayer to GOD, “What can I do with these people? Any minute now they'll kill me!”

⁵GOD said to Moses, “Go on out ahead of the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel. Take the staff you used to strike the Nile. And go. ⁶I'm going to be present before you there on the rock at Horeb. You are to strike the rock. Water will gush out of it and the people will drink.”

Moses did what he said, with the elders of Israel right there watching. ⁷He named the place Massah (Testing-Place) and Meribah (Quarreling) because of the quarreling of the Israelites and because of their testing of GOD when they said, “Is GOD here with us, or not?”

The city of Philippi in northeastern Macedonia was named for Philip II, the king of Macedonia and father of Alexander the Great. Paul, along with Silas and Thomas travelled to Philippi in around 50 C.E. and founded the Philippian Christian church. According to the language used in these letters, there appears to be a special relationship between Paul and the Philippians, reminiscent of a Roman legal contract where both parties are working together for the same goal. At the time of writing this letter, Paul was a prisoner in Rome and as easy as it would be for Paul to dwell on his own situation he turns his attention to the Gospel and how his imprisonment will impact the spreading of the Good News. This part of the letter encourages the community at Philippi to come together in unity and partnership, to be together as one soul. He calls them to live a life as Christ lived.

Philippians 2: 1-13

¹If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*—²then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. ³Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. ⁴Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

⁵Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. ⁶He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. ⁷Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! ⁸Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

⁹Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, ¹⁰so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, ¹¹and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

REJOICING TOGETHER

¹²What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I'm separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. ¹³That energy is *God's* energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.

Theme – Oh, to be human.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – “Oh, to be human”

For the last 3 weeks we have been looking at the Gospel of Matthew and some of the messages that we have been talking about include; loving ones neighbor, and learning to love oneself and God's love for us, forgiveness and moving into new right relationship and God's forgiveness like the air we breathe, and last week for baptism we looked at judgement and God's grace.

How many of you remember the movie “Heaven Can Wait?” This film was released in 1979 and I remember going to see this at the old Polo Park cinemas. This comedy is based on the story of a Los Angeles Rams quarterback, Joe Pendleton played by Warren Beatty, who is prematurely taken from his body by an over anxious angel before he is set to die and therefore is sent back to earth in the body of a recently murdered millionaire.

This movie was remade in 2001 with comedian Chris Rock playing the lead and it was released with the title “Down to Earth.”

This idea of heaven is one of those things that we don't really know a lot about, where is heaven? What do we do there? Will we all get into heaven?

I remember reading a review of a book called "Golfing with God" written by Roland Merullo, the review went like this;

In a previous life, Herman "Hank" Fins-Winston had been a golf pro – an excellent teacher of the game who never quite made it on the circuit, having missed his one real shot at greatness. He now lives in a lovely condominium on the thirteenth fairway of one of heaven's 8,187 golf courses. God and His closest companions, you see, play the game often. And though Jesus never bothers to keep score, Buddha never takes a practice swing, and Moses doesn't consider it cheating when he parts the courses' water hazards, they all take the sport very seriously. In heaven, even God replaces His divots.

Hank's afterlife takes an unexpected turn when he is summoned to help a player whose game is in a slump. To his dismay, his new pupil is God Himself. Or Herself. Depending on the day. As they play the most heavenly courses in paradise and back on earth, Hank realizes that it's he who's learning the lessons – about fearing failure, about second chances, about the connectedness of all living things, about not taking the next breath for granted, and about our God-given ability to improve ourselves one shot at a time.

In our reading this morning from Exodus we hear one of the stories from the Israelites journey to the Promised Land. In this story we hear of the people coming to Moses complaining, for the 4th time since the people had left Egypt, that they were thirsting and complaining that Moses had taken them out of Egypt, where at least they had water to drink and I imagine also food to eat. Moses then goes to God and asks what he is to do with the people, God in turn tells Moses to strike a rock with his staff and out from that rock comes water for the people to drink. This story is interesting on a number of different levels. In Exodus 17 we have heard that this place is called by Moses either Massah (Testing-Place) and Meribah (Quarreling), why did Moses not call this place "the source of abundant water" or "the place where God provided." Maybe this is because the people did not believe, they did not believe that the God, who had taken them out of Egypt, would also be the God who would provide for them, and so they doubted and they tested God. But this would not have been an easy journey, this was not like our journeys that we take these days, many with our air conditioned vehicles, with the technology to bring along DVDs for the young ones to watch, hotels to stay in, restaurants to eat in, this was a struggle, everyday would have been a struggle for the people.

So this brings up for me an important question that is relevant for us today, as it would have been for those people wandering in the desert all those years ago, "How can we know if God is really with us or not?"

So now we come to the last reading this morning Paul's letter to the Philippians. The reading this morning is all about relationships, this part of the letter begins with how one should act in relationship with others, it is relational. Which for me so very important because of what comes next as Paul talks about Jesus, but I believe that this is also relational. This section of the letter deals with a question that I ask myself and that is "Why did Jesus come?"

My first summer at Atlantic School of Theology I had a class taught by systematic theologian, Dr. David Deane and he has some interesting ideas regarding God and

Jesus. According to Dr. Deane as much as many of us like ourselves, we cannot come into true relationship with ourselves because we will only be coming into relationship with nothing that is different than what we are. Dr. Deane then presumes that because of this God actually created creation, because according to Dr. Deane, God is a God of relationship and we were built to be in relationship both with God and with each other. You see God created us in God's image, but we are not God, we cannot ever be God, we are the same (in the image of God) and yet we are profoundly different.

I find this interesting because if we go back to the beginning of the bible, what is the first thing in the creation story that is not good. As God is forming creation, God says it was "good," but then God realizes that there was something in creation that was not good, but what was that? After God had created the heavens and the earth, after God had created all the creatures, after God had created man, God realized that what is not good is that "man/individual was alone." I believe, and so does Dr. Deane, that we have been made to be in relationship and in the story from Exodus the community is struggling with being in relationship with God. Their struggles are impacting a relationship with God. If we come back to Philippians we can then see how God comes into true relationship with us as humanity and that is through the life of God incarnate, Jesus. God became human and Dr. Deane believes that this is so that God can come into true relationship with humanity that which God has desired since the dawn of creation.

And so what does any of this have to do with us today, here and now. In Paul's letter he talks about what truly being in community, in relationship means, it is not about our own individual desires, it is about the community as a whole. It is about what can we do to bring all of humanity, our world-wide community to something more. Paul says that we need to embrace Jesus.

We need to embrace that relationship with God that was made possible when God became fully human in Christ, but that is not all. We also need to begin to work at being like Christ in the world. In the midst of our humanity, we are challenged to rise above our own selfish desires, to live as God in Jesus lived. But what does this mean? **David Lose who is the Marbury E Anderson Biblical Preaching Chair at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota states it in this way, "It means going about our everyday tasks and duties with the conviction that the gospel is true-that is, that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death, and that God's promised future is bigger and better than either the past we've created or the future we deserve. And because the gospel is true, we are free to regard others, treat others, and care for others as Christ did."**

We now come back to heaven, that place where we imagine God lives. I wonder what would happen if we truly began to live in relationship with God and with others as Jesus did. Is heaven, God's kingdom, then some far off distance place that we must wait to enter, providing we make it there? Is it that golf course where we meet God and are humbled because we have not learned those lessons, or can it be something different? What if God's kingdom could be right here right now?

What if the title should not be "Heaven can Wait," but rather "Heaven Can't Wait" because we are ushering in God's kingdom right here right now. We are challenged as Christians to treat others as Jesus would have treated others, but not only within this community, but within the larger community, within the world and in this way we might truly change this world so that it becomes the kingdom of the God of love, compassion,

and grace. If we live as the gospel is true, we will love ourselves and others as God loves us, we will forgive and move to right relationship, as God forgives and we will not judge that others are less than and live into the grace of God every day. Heaven on earth, God's kingdom here and now, let it be so. **AMEN**