

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Third Sunday in Lent • March 15, 2020**

**Exodus 17:1-7 • Psalm 95 • Romans 5:1-11 • John 4:5-42**

One of the Eucharistic prayers that we occasionally use includes a section that praises God for the arc of salvation throughout history. Reflecting on God's provision throughout the ages, it praises God for "the rescue from Egypt" and "the gift of the promised land." This isn't wrong, but it brushes over a few things. Namely, those forty years spent wandering around the wilderness. A more accurate Eucharistic prayer might be something like, "The rescue from Egypt. The forty years in the wilderness where things were very touch and go for a while and a bunch of stuff happened that we'd rather not get into, namely anything involving golden calves. The gift of the promised land."

We often skip over that messy middle part. We talk about Lent and Easter as a journey, but then cut out all of the actual journeying stuff. We move from darkness into light, slavery into freedom, death into life with nothing in between. It makes it sound like these things happen immediately. But we know they often don't. Moving from death into life isn't some Kubler-Ross program you can run through in a weekend. Moving from dark to light often means being stuck in a tricky gray area. Moving from Egypt to the promised land often requires getting stuck in the wilderness. And we'd rather leave that out.

Let me give you a sense of how fast the Israelites sour on their journey into freedom. In chapter fourteen, the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt. In chapter fifteen, the Israelites celebrate their escape from slavery in Egypt. And in chapter sixteen, the Israelites start complaining about their escape from slavery in Egypt.

And it's easy to understand why. Slavery in Egypt was bad. You had no freedom. You had no dignity. And you had no future. But you had enough to survive. It was in Egypt's interest to make sure that you stayed alive and healthy enough to labor for them. You have an economy that is all about exchange. You provide us with your labor, we will make sure you get enough food that you don't die. And that's the way gods worked in Egypt, too. You prayed to a god and if you prayed well enough you got what you wanted. And if that god didn't give you what you wanted, well that was that god's problem, so you went off and found another god. Your relationships with your neighbors and with God are all about exchanging, bartering, trading.

But in the wilderness, things are different. You have freedom. You have dignity. You have a future. But things are never guaranteed. There is no strongman figure like pharaoh who promises that you won't die because it's not in his economic self-interest. And so now the exchange that robbed you of your dignity in Egypt starts to look pretty good. Making a deal with Pharaoh is easier than having to trust God. And the God who brought you out of Egypt doesn't operate the way the gods in Egypt do either. It's not an exchange. It's a covenant. Which means you can't just run off to another one who gives you what you want. You're stuck.

And so the people go to Moses and complain. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" Notice that when the people start complaining to Moses, they don't just say that Moses took a wrong turn somewhere or made a mistake. They question the entire endeavor. They don't just say that the wilderness is harder than they thought it would be or that they could really use some water. They say that they want to go back to Egypt. They want to go back a situation they know they hate rather than have to trust in a God they can't fully understand.

That's usually the case with our complaining. Whenever people set out to follow God's call, there is always complaining along the way. Sometimes that complaining is based on substantive

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grievances based on actual facts. And sometimes it's not. But what usually lies underneath all that complaining is a real need that isn't being acknowledged or even articulated. So often the thing we're complaining about isn't really the thing that's bothering us.

The Israelites have been talking about water, but they're really complaining about God's absence. Underneath all the handwringing and protesting about water is a much deeper lament about whether God is worthy of trust. You probably noticed that there's a funny shift that happens at the end of the story. We've had this long narrative about the Israelites getting something to drink, an argument about water, and then the author of Exodus sums it up this way. Moses "called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" Has God abandoned us or not? It's not really about the water. It almost never is.

In the sixteenth century, a Spanish reformer and mystic named Juan de la Cruz wrote a book entitled, "The Dark Night of the Soul." "The Dark Night of the Soul" is about how people live faithful lives devoted to the service of God and find that discipleship doesn't protect them from the wraths and sorrows of life. Sometimes it seems like God rewards faith with suffering and grief.

This was not just theoretical for Juan. Because of the reforms he sought to bring to the Spanish church, he was imprisoned. After escaping from prison, he was recaptured, banished, and died of a severe illness. He knew what he was talking about. And he was trying to reflect on that moment when you feel like you've lost everything you've known and held dear, and you begin to feel like you're losing God, too. God used to give me these blessings, but that I'm not receiving these blessings anymore, and I'm at the point where I feel like I'm losing God.

And Juan suggests that in those moments, we are not actually losing God. What we're losing is our instrumental use for God. We thought we loved God, but it turned out we really just loved the stuff God gave us. We loved the health. We loved the family. We loved the marriage. We loved the money. We loved the sense of normalcy. We loved being told that we were a good person. So, Juan suggests, the question for each of us when our soul has its own dark night isn't whether we love God. It's whether we love God when God has nothing to offer us besides her presence.

This story is essentially about a community facing its own dark night of the soul. Struggling with whether they can still love God when they have to stop receiving and consuming and have to start trusting. Because underneath all that kvetching to Moses is an assumption about that the Israelites have about God. It's an assumption some of us have, too. They assume that when God stops giving me what I want, God must be absent. Blessings are a sign of God's presence. They assume that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob works the same way as the gods of pharaoh.

And when they realize that isn't true. That God doesn't just exist to bless their own agenda. That they can't just move along to some other God. That God is more concerned with their freedom than with their happiness, they feel like they're losing God. But as Juan de la Cruz would remind us, what they're actually losing is their instrumental use for God.

God, of course, gives them water from the rock. God and Moses work out a plan for them to get something to drink. But remember that it's really not about the water. It's about whether this God is actually worthy of your trust when things start to go awry. Because the danger for the Israelites and for us is not that God will abandon us in the wilderness. It's that when the Red Sea parts, we decide it's easier to stay in Egypt. The danger is that we get so used to Egypt that eventually we decide it's good enough. It's not the promised land, but it's predictable. It's not the promised land, but it's what we know.

When the Israelites fear that God has abandoned them, God gives them just enough for one day. Just enough to keep going. That's the hardest lesson for us to learn in the wilderness. That God is never absent. Just going ahead of us.

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