

Lent III (A)
Genesis 17.1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5.1-11; John 4.1-42
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
24 February 2008

The Wilderness and the Well

~Paul H. Friesen~

The last verse of our reading from *Genesis* last Sunday said: 'And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negev.' The first verse of our reading from *Exodus* this Sunday says: 'From the wilderness...the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.' It's not hard to see what's going on.

Our ancestors in the faith learned that the life of the pilgrim is pretty much the best description of the life of any child of God. And of course, Jesus knew this when he kept telling his new disciples to become pilgrims, as we hear it in the Gospels. '[Jesus] found Philip and said to him "Follow me".' 'When [James and John and Simon] had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed [Jesus].' '[Jesus] saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.'¹ And of course Jesus said the same to many others.

So we might be convinced that the biblical way is the way of the pilgrim who follows God's voice, most especially the pilgrim who walks in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. But how is it that we are supposed to travel?

We are meant to travel as if everything that happens to us along the way has the potential, the capacity, to shape us into the Christians, and the parish, God created us to be. This is how we are able to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

St. Paul doesn't tell the Romans to enjoy the painful things in life, but he does talk about their meaning: 'Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, *because* God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.'

Human life is a gift from God, and Christ's birth and life and death and resurrection are a gift from God to all. We are constantly invited by the Scriptures to begin and continue and complete the stages of our journey by responding to God's gifts.

¹ *John 1.43; Luke 5.11; Mark 2.14.* All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

So today's Scriptures describe two very different ways of travelling through life: the way of Israelites in the wilderness, and the way of the Samaritan woman at the well.

The way of the Israelites in the wilderness at Massah—or Meribah—has been handed down to us as the *unhappy* way to travel. Psalm 95, which we just read to each other, repeated the story of this dark episode, and for thousands of years of worship both Jews and Christians we have been reminded about what went wrong. In the old Anglican service of Morning Prayer, this Psalm is to be said daily.

From one point of view, the Israelites, the ancient people of the Lord, our ancestors in the faith, could have avoided this whole unfortunate scene. By the time we get to *Exodus* 17, what do they know? Of what can they be sure as they quarrel with God?

They know that the Lord God led their ancestor Abraham out of the great but cruel civilization of Mesopotamia to a new land. to become a great nation that would bless the world.

They know that when their ancestors were enslaved by the ancient Pharaohs, God heard their cry and sent Moses to lead them out of slavery.

They know that God's promise was to take them to a land of freedom, overflowing with necessities of life, where they could live in peace.

They know now that God had led them through the Red Sea, out of the clutches of Pharaoh's army—just months earlier.

And in the two chapters previous to today's reading our ancestors discovered that when they complained to the Lord about a shortage of food or a lack of water, God would hear their cry.²

But there is something new in today's reading, the tone has changed. The Hebrew word we translate in English as 'quarrel' has not been used before in *Exodus* to describe the Israelites' earlier complaints. One Rabbi puts it this way: '[This new word] conjures up a picture of an angry and hostile confrontation in which the people, professing to be an aggrieved party, levy charges against God and Moses.'³

They are aggrieved. They feel they have been denied what they deserve. They feel they have not received the things that they are entitled to. And so they act as if they are suing God in court.

² See *Genesis* 15.22ff & 16.1ff. A helpful summary is supplied by Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Commentary: Exodus* (Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p.83.

³ *Ibid*, p. 94.

They accuse their invisible, Almighty God and their very visible and traumatized leader, Moses. They charge them with bad faith, with ulterior motives: ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’

So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.””

It is all summed up in the last verse of the passage: ‘The Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’

‘Is the Lord among us or not?’ In fact, we are not discouraged, in the Scripture, from arguing with God. Abraham and Moses and Job did it.

And St. Paul argued with everyone. But this is something all together different. God had been faithful to his people many times, and very recently, but they felt they were entitled to more than that God seemed to be delivering. And so they ask—does God even trouble himself to be with us? And if he does show up, is it to our benefit? The problem wasn’t despair or anger—these things God accepts from us. The problem was cynicism.

Though they really did know that everything thus far was a gift of God, they accused God of now trying to get the better of them, of pulling a fast one.

And so they practice what Rowan Williams, our Archbishop calls ‘bad religion’, in his own book called *Tokens of Trust*. He describes bad religion, in general, as ‘not trusting God, trying to avoid God or even outwitting him; approaching God as...critical or hostile, always to be outmanoeuvred where possible.’⁴

This is the *unhappy* way to travel through God’s world, with the lives that God has given us. The surprise is that the woman at the well shows us the better way, the *happy* way, the *blessed* way.

The Samaritan woman, whom Jesus met at the well, had few of the advantages of the Israelites who met God in the wilderness.

She belonged to a group that had broken off from the Israelites centuries before Jesus’ birth, and had built their own temple to the Lord up in the hills on Gerizim. Relations with mainstream Judaism were always tense.⁵ We know that a few decades after Jesus’ life, Samaritans had captured and slaughtered a group of Galilean pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, and a reprisal raid had, of course, followed. The Samaritans were seen as violent heretics who falsely claimed the same ancestry as the Israelites.

⁴ *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction of Christian Belief* (Louisville: WJKP, 2007), p.7-8.

⁵ See, for instance, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed, J.D. Douglas, N. Hillyer, *et. al.* (Leicester: I.V.P., 1980), Part 3, p.1378-1380. Only a handful of ‘Samaritans’ remain alive today.

So when Jesus greeted her with a request for a drink, her quick observation could not have been a surprise: ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ And the bewildered response of his just-returned disciples at the story’s end is understandable too: ‘They were astonished that [Jesus] was speaking with a [Samaritan] woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or ‘Why are you speaking with her?’

After all, they had only stopped out of necessity on their way from Jerusalem to Galilee. And Jesus was conversing with a Samaritan, and a woman at that! [This surprise has in fact echoed through the imagination of artists over the centuries, as we shall be able to see on the screen during Holy Communion.]

Yes, this Samaritan had the disadvantage of being both a heretic, and a woman. Jesus had a reputation for taking women seriously, in an era when their religious role was severely restricted, to say the least. Jesus’ interest in women’s minds was something the twelve didn’t really get, even after Jesus’ resurrection. But this woman, in particular! What was Jesus thinking?

She was a Samaritan, she was a woman, and she was the wrong kind of woman. She had married five times, and then given up on marriage all together, and was just living with her most recent partner.

Jesus, we know, upheld faithfulness in marriage, and upheld the sacrifices of the ancient Temple, and the observance of the covenant of the Law. And yet Jesus was in deep conversation with her. So what was he doing?

Jesus simply presented himself to her. “The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” And she simply responded: “The woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said ...“Come and see...He cannot be the Messiah, can he?””

This was the hopeful, the trustful question by the woman at the well, so different from the question put so crudely in the wilderness—“Is the Lord among us or not?”

We are in the middle of Lent, and about to enter our Annual General Meeting. It is a time to look back and look forward.

We are presented with two ways to continue our pilgrimage as Christians and as a Parish.

Do we step forward claiming our religious rights, feeling entitled, claiming what God owes us for our ancestors, our good lives, our good works? This is the *unhappy* way. *Or do we step forward* with the Samaritan woman, and say ‘yes’ to the grace of Jesus Christ, acknowledge our sin and brokenness, drop our water-pot and receive Christ’s gift of redemption? This is the *blessed* way.

This morning we have a moment to pause with the Samaritan woman at the well, at our Eucharist, and journey on in gratitude.