

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Year A, RCL
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
Winston-Salem, NC
The Rev'd Lawrence M. Womack
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Great. It's about time. I have been waiting to say a couple of things for the past two weeks. Two weeks ago, as you may remember, I ignored the majority of my prepared remarks in order to discuss the two "Devin Moore's" (which, incidentally should have been the two "Wes Moore's" – my apologies). Last week, if I hadn't been so rudely interrupted by this upstart of an intern and his fine sermon, I would have said something similar to what I had planned to say two weeks before. And I am going to say today, what I had planned to say and would have said: GOD IS FAITHFUL!

Much of what we tend to focus on, especially with regard to specific heroes and heroines of Biblical stature is their monumental faith. We tend to and have focused on (and often marvel at) how strong their faith seems to have been; how they were able to trust God in the midst of long odds.

But with the shift to Moses and what will become the nation of Israel, with this story, we begin to focus on God's Faithfulness. Maybe you all would have been able to trust God implicitly when you were given the same message Moses received at the "burning bush":

So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' ¹¹But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' ¹²He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.' (Exodus 3:10b-12)

Being sent on a journey of such magnitude, I think I would have liked a little up-front reassurance that God would be with me. I suppose he received a little reassurance with the whole staff-to-snake-to staff bit and the healthy-to-leprous-to-healthy hand sign, as well, but I mean really, "and this shall be the sign for you... when you have brought the people out of Egypt," that is, after you have accomplished the entire task, "you shall worship God on this mountain." That is a little after the fact, don't you think?

But after seeing all of the plagues - the Nile turned to blood, the frogs, the gnats, the flies, sick livestock, the boils, the thunder and hail, the locusts, darkness – it might have been easy to believe that God was with him. All of these plagues affected Egypt

and its people, but did not affect the Hebrews. So, I suppose it might have been easier to follow these strict rules about how to prepare the Passover lamb and how to eat it and when to eat it. But the specific instructions about what to do with the blood, well that just might have put it out of the realm of compliance. And what's to say that this marking of the doorpost and the lintel could stop a God whose power had proven to be so absolute in the first nine plagues. Maybe best to run and hide somewhere, not stay at home. Yet, the people trusted and God was Faithful. God did just exactly what was promised – the Hebrews lost none of their firstborn.

Was it simply because of their ancestry or was it because they were obedient, or maybe it was due to the fact that they listened to God's Chosen, Moses, that they were spared. Although those are parts of the answer, their survival was ultimately contingent upon God's Faithfulness. I suppose that we could ask the same question about the plagues as we did about the babies that died during the time that Moses was born. And if we accept one strand of the theology that these stories assert: God's Chosen are God's Chosen and if it is God's Will to liberate you, then God will decimate an entire country for that purpose. That is not a very inspiring picture of the Creator, is it? It's great if you are included in the "Chosen," but leaves you in the hand of an all-powerful and vengeful God if you are not. Sure, God is Faithful, but only to those who are chosen.

This is not a comfortable proposition nor is it an easy question to answer, yet we have this story that helps to mark the history of the Hebrew people. These etiologies, these stories that recount the beginnings of traditions or practices that have become central to the understanding of the Jewish faith and important for us as inheritors of that faith and worshippers of Jesus, seek to tie the tradition (its action and its theology) to actual events. And even as this is the case, we are left with a sour taste in our mouths, that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus would be active in the suffering and slaughter of thousands of innocents, even if it was done on behalf of the Chosen People.

I will not try to remove or explain away the difficulty this poses, except to echo what some commentators have said: that this portrayal of God and God's Character is not complete. To put it rather tritely, God is bigger than this. It is one of those ambiguities with which we, as believing people, must wrestle. I will say that it is our joy and comfort to know and understand that our way of salvation, our exodus, if you will, is marked by a path that follows a savior who seeks to love us into salvation, not

scare or shame or punish us into a salvific relationship. The God that is portrayed in the story of the Exodus (and we will deal with this more next week) is the same God that sent Jesus – “The Lamb that takes away the sins of the world” – our Passover Lamb.

But getting back to the story, in context, God is faithful to the trust that the Hebrews demonstrate by following Moses’ instructions. This is another step in God’s Faithful Promise to bring Moses and the people back to “worship on this mountain.” It is also part of the larger narrative that ties God’s Covenant with Moses (i.e. to bring them back to worship God on Mount Sinai) to God’s Covenant with Abraham (i.e. that his descendents would inherit and inhabit the land of Canaan.)

As confusing as this story is, as much as it assaults our sensibilities and challenges our notion of a loving and merciful god, it does remind us of how God can and will use the Divine Power to come to our aid. Because, like it or not, there are those situations in which we need God’s Power; there are those times when we need for God to “pass over” us, protecting us from those things that would consume us.

When we need to experience our own personal exoduses, we need to be able to trust in God’s Faithfulness and that we will be brought back to worship God on the mountain of our salvation. Friends, the God of Hope is the God who is Faithful and to which we owe our faithfulness and allegiance. The God of Mercy and Grace is the God and Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! It is to that God that we witness, to that God that we live and to that God we hope and look to for our deliverance. It is this God who is faithful to do what was promised. “And just what has God promised?” you might ask. God has promised, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that we are precious in the sight of the Almighty; that we will be able to stand on the promises of God’s Mercy and Grace; that Jesus came to earth for the sake of the entirety of Creation; that God is indeed faithful and ready to save so that all the world will know the Power of the Love of God.