

Proper 21 B 2021

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Psalm 19:7-14

Mark 9:38-50

It's not easy to live in the wilderness.
Most people are not very good at it.
It's not easy
to find a way out of a lost place,
and many people lose heart.
It's not easy to return from exile,
And find that home is not the same.

Sadness.
Anger. Fear.
Disillusionment. Frustration.

All these feelings
Are part of the story of the people of God.
We are not the first to struggle,
To lament,
To look back.

The children of Israel in the wilderness
Have a story we can share.
And the crowds who listened to Jesus,
And wondered at his words,
Have a story we can share.

I hope,
And yes, I trust,
That if we set ourselves –
And this confusing and protracted place
In which we find ourselves –
within the broad sweep of the story of faith,
And enter into the experience
Of those who have gone before,
We may find a wisdom
And even a courage
To face the challenges of this hour,
And the living of these days.

The lessons we're given for today
Don't have an obvious resonance with current events,
And they don't offer beautiful words of comfort,

Or bracing inspiration.
But there is, always in the words of scripture,
Sometimes clear and sometimes hidden,
A word of hope
A call to action,
A fresh breath of the spirit.

So let's go first into the wilderness of the first lesson
And see what we find there.

The children of Israel
Are lost in the wilderness,
Angry, disillusioned,
Fearful, frustrated.

So lost that slavery seems preferable
To the wandering and hardship and uncertainty
Of the present hour.

They have no idea what will happen next.
They have lost trust in their leader.
And they don't know where they are.

What is it like to be this people?
And what is it like
To lead this people through the pain and misery
Of the time?

Frustrating and disillusioning.
Moses is just as miserable as the people
Who have been put into his care.

But – and here's the part in which we might take hope –
The answer is bigger
And more promising than the problem.

How does God answer the complaining of the people?
How does God answer Moses, who whines and complains?
By showing him a way out?
By making his voice louder and more persuasive?
No.
By sending the spirit of prophecy,
And the capacity for leadership,
On a great number of the people.

And with the honor, and burden,

And responsibility of leadership shared,
The people press on.

Would that all God's people were prophets.
I don't know, right now,
What that would look like in our country,
Or for our planet,
But I have some glimmer
Of what it might look like in a community of faith.

So, since this community of faith
Is a place where we have choices,
Of how to live
And how to relate to one another
And how to engage the world,
Let it be true here.
Or rather,
Let us recognize that it is already
And has for many years been true here.
All God's people are prophets here.

If this community is a microcosm,
A learning laboratory
For the coming of God's commonwealth of love and justice,
Also known as the kingdom of heaven,
If this is a place where we can show forth a better way,
And seek the renewal of the world,
Then here at least,
Let all God's people be prophets.

Prophets – friends of God.
Not predictors of the future.
This is not a moment when the future can be known.
But keepers of the vision.
Speakers of the truth.

For me, at this time,
This time in our nation,
This time in our city,
This time in our parish,
I take wisdom and courage from this:
The spirit of God falls upon all of us,
Empowering us to know the truth and seek the good.
Keeping alive within us the hope
That will bring us to a good future.

In our country,
We are divided and embittered,
Longing for a way out of a pandemic that goes on and on,
Anxious about the future of democracy,
Angry about the plight of refugees,
Those without homes,
Those too long denied justice.

We are shaken by the long time of exile,
Infected by the despair of those around us,
Uncertain about the certainty of change.

It doesn't have to be that way
Here, in this community of worship and music
And lifelong formation and shared service
And the search for justice.
We can show and share a better way.

In our parish,
We have been through season after season of discernment,
We have weathered conflict
And given our hearts
To one demanding project after another,
Only to encounter,
Again and again,
the disappointment and relief
Of having the projects encounter roadblocks.
And still we press on.

We have seen our worship life –
The heart of our parish –
Changed again and again.
And still we respond with creativity and fortitude.

Our fellowship with each other
Has had to change.
And we are still bound together in love.

The way we engage in formation
Has had to change.
And we have been grateful to find that formation
Enriched and expanded by taking a new form.

Our commitment to justice,
And our will to find new ways to act,
Gained strength and vigor in this time.

And our ministry with our youngest members
Has had to change
Perhaps most of all –
Has changed so radically
That for many among us,
It has become invisible.
But we have been present
To our youngest members,
Brand new babies
And little children growing up in masks,
In new ways.

The life of our church is still here,
Because through it all,
The spirit of God has been raining down.
The spirit lights upon all of us,
showing us a way forward.

Today's story from Hebrew scripture
Gives us something to hold fast
In these dark times.

And what about the story of Jesus?
What's the good news of the gospel today?
It's not easy to find.
The colorful,
Attention grabbing,
Somewhat gruesome and scary words of Jesus
About millstones and severed limbs
May put us off.
But let's try,
And I use these words advisedly,
Knowing they have a history,
To take what Jesus is saying seriously,
But not literally.

What is Jesus inviting us to do?
Demanding that we do?

When he tells us to cut off and throw away
Those things that cause us to sin,
That is, that cut us off
From the reconciling love of God,
What is he asking us to do?
One way to frame it is this:

What is getting in our way?
Talking up too much time?
Distracting us?
Clouding our vision?
Making us resentful,
Or guarded,
Or mean?

Cut it off, and throw it away.
Shed the worn out shackles
Of anything that keeps us from life and love.

Jesus is calling us to fullness of life.
To a life well-salted,
Brimming with possibility and hope.
That's good news.

In these difficult, spirit-crushing,
Wearisome times,
These lessons from scripture,
Unpromising as they might seem at first,
Can, I believe,
Offer us insight and hope.

They don't come to us with beautiful images,
But they offer a vision of community
That could sustain and inspire.

A community where all God's people are prophets,
Hearing the voice of God,
Catching the passion of God,
Proclaiming the comfort and justice of God.

A community where the sorrowful pray,
And find companions in prayer.
Where the joyful sing hymns of praise,
And find other voices to swell the song.
A community of confession, reconciliation,
And peacemaking.

A community with broad borders,
Where we understand our kinship with many beyond our walls.
Those who stand for justice.
Those who stand for love,
Those who hold on to hope.

Those who can be at peace with one another.

If we could show only that to the world,
If we could show only that to a divided and embittered country,
Angry, fearful,
Disillusioned and disappointed,
And battered by the news of the day,
That would be enough.

Some among us may be called to immediate action.
Some to prayer.
Some may need a time of silence,
A time to heal.

But for all of us,
It is a time to live the good news.
A time to show the good news
To those who can hear and see.
It is, at least, a way to begin.
A first step
On the journey from the wilderness
To the promised land.