

SERMON MANUSCRIPT - 8/2/2020
LUKE CHILDS

Psalm 78:1-26, Nehemiah 9:16-21, Matthew 14:13-21

Now I don't know about you, but at this point in the COVID-19 Pandemic many are feeling somewhat lost and confused. All of the mask-wearing, social-distancing, and lockdown measures were initially put in place for a specific reason, and with something of a timeframe in-place. The idea was to slow the number of critical cases of Coronavirus so that hospitals could handle them - to 'flatten the curve'. For various reasons, that didn't really happen, and in fact now cases have spiked beyond even the peak when this all began, and so we are now in a situation where there seems to be no definite end in sight to restrictions - yes, we can talk about when a vaccine might or might not be produced and distributed, and use buzzwords like 'herd immunity', and these are important scientific considerations. But medical experts are saying that it will be some time before any kind of vaccine is widely available, and the idea of making Coronavirus 'disappear' is so far off the cards that if it ever happens at all, it will be a very long time. Dr. Anthony Fauci recently stated that there is 'no end in sight' for Coronavirus.

It can seem as if we started something together - this 'lockdown' situation - with a goal and an endpoint, but now in the (admittedly extended) midst of the situation, it can be easy for us to despair, and doubt anything will ever change, and to even seek potentially dangerous ways to force a return to normal life. Ultimately, what all of this boils down to is: It can be easy to forget where God is in all of this.

Feeling lost and without hope in a proverbial wilderness is certainly not a situation unique to us living today - in fact, both our Psalm and our Old Testament reading recall a literal situation where the people of Israel wandered the desert en-route to the 'land flowing with milk and honey' promised to them by God. They too, in the midst of the bleakness and the difficulties ahead, began to forget God, to doubt, to despair, and to look to their own solutions.

I want to posit that what this situation in the history of Israel - the history of God's people - shows us is one vital thing that we can always cling to: It shows us the contrast of our faithlessness, or lack of faith, and God's never-changing faithfulness. But more fundamentally - here is your one-sentence takeaway - it shows us that God is always faithful, even in spite or, or in the midst of, our faithlessness.

It's important to begin by setting some context to our reading from Nehemiah - these verses can seem something of a strange portion to pull and read on their own. Historically, we're in the time after the Jews were carted off into exile in Babylon, and have now been allowed to return to the land of Judah thanks to a new leader, King Cyrus. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah together form a narrative of this return from exile, and the rebuilding of the temple. At this point in the narrative, the exiled peoples have returned to Judah, the wall around Jerusalem has been rebuilt, and the people counted in census by family name.

Chapter 8 of Nehemiah begins with Ezra the scribe bringing forward the Books of the Law to be read to the people. Why? Because they had been in Babylon so long that it had been many, many years since they had last heard the words of God's Law...they had forgotten what was in it. This is very apparent when at the end of Nehemiah chapter 8, just before today's reading, the people 'find out' from the reading of the Law that there is a Feast of Booths (or Feast of Tabernacles) that they should be celebrating at this time of year.

Sukkot, or Succoth, is in fact one of the highest holy-days in the entire Jewish year to this very day, and so for the people (including the priests!) to have forgotten about this, and to have rediscovered it by reading the Law again gives us an idea of the level at which they had been without ability to read or know God's Law while in exile. They were in fact likely expected to assimilate into the religion of the Babylonians - a notable example of this is in the Book of Daniel, where the Three Young Men refuse to bow down to a statue of the king, Nebuchanezzar, and are thrown into a furnace as punishment.

What's so important about Succoth? As we move into our reading today in Chapter 9, we see that this Feast of Tabernacles is a recollection of God's actions in rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt, leading them across the Red Sea, and on a journey to that land 'flowing with milk and honey' I mentioned at the beginning. But it's also more than that - our small snippet today falls in the midst of a public act of repentance for the ways in which the people *still* committed the same sins as the Israelites wandering the desert, how that land they were given was abused, taken advantage of for political or material gain, and how they rested in their creature comforts and forgot God, which ultimately led to them being conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile.

A public act of repentance, led by the priests, in which sins of the past were remembered, analyzed in light of the present, and recognition was made of how they continue to be perpetuated. Think about that.

Interestingly still, this is a corporate act of confession. Why? Well, firstly because every individual in that community will have likely broken the Law in some way or another at varying levels, but more because God does not call out isolated individuals to walk on their own paths with Him - he calls out a people. When we become Christians, we become members of the Church, not lone wanderers. You'll notice earlier, when we had our time of Confession in the service, the language said was that of 'we' - we have erred and strayed...we have followed our own hearts...we have left things undone. We are not isolated individuals coming to God saying I did this, I did that - sin has a corporate dimension, and can have corporate effects. Yes, we can of course pray privately for forgiveness, and because of faith in Christ, God will fulfill his promise and grant us forgiveness absolutely, but the comfort of hearing the words of absolution from someone who has been authorized to give those words on God's behalf is something that you cannot get on your own. The Scriptures also call us to 'confess our sins to one another' (James 5:16) to keep ourselves (appropriately!) accountable to those closest to us in the faith, and frankly because sometimes they are the very people we have wronged, and so they are the people who we need to be making restitution with as well as God.

Now many of the sins confessed by the people of Judah throughout this chapter of Nehemiah relate to ways in which they have forgotten God. So I want us to unpack three ways that the Israelites wandered the desert, recalled in our reading, forgot God, and relate them to ways in which we forget God. St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:6 tells us that these actions of Israel serve as an example to us, that we might not do the same thing - just as the Feast of Tabernacles is meant to serve as a recognition of perpetuated sins, and a renewed zeal to not continue in those ways.

The first (and potentially the easiest to fall into) was that they began, over time, to moan, and grumble, and complain. They 'acted presumptuously' as verse 16 puts it, and they 'stiffened their necks'. This neck-stiffening is a phrase you see often in the Old Testament, particularly in various Psalms. It's an agricultural reference relating to the use of oxen to pull carts. An ox that was particularly hard to control was regarded as being 'stiff-necked', as a pole with an iron spike on the end of was used to prick the ox's neck in order to steer it, and a 'stiff neck' would not be nearly as affected by the spike, and so would feel no need to acquiesce. It's a metaphor for the stubbornness of the Israelites, and their lack of willingness to be led.

The Israelites, as they were led through the Sahara Desert, began to complain - now, I should raise that there is nuance to be applied to us here. There are ways that are completely legitimate expressions of just how we're feeling in times of difficulty, ways of seeking help or assistance from others, and ways of just 'being real' with other friends or other believers in a relationship of trust, where words of encouragement can follow, and the conversation be beneficial. However, there are also situations where complaining is either more public than it ought to be appropriately, or it is a judgmental complaint (in the ways that Fr. John discussed a couple of weeks ago, where we were looking at discernment, judgment and boundaries). In those situations, such complaining may indicate an internal problem of heart that needs to be brought to the Lord in prayer, it may do damage to our witness to non-believers, and it may cause gossip and dissension among other believers.

In Israel's case here, we have an example of damaging complaint - one to the extent that some would have preferred to have stayed in Egypt - remaining in slavery. What might a Christian application of this look like? Well perhaps complaint to the level of thinking that it would have been better if we'd never even known Jesus, and had just been left to enjoy our sinful pleasures until the Day of Judgment. Now we all have times of difficulty, this is not to denigrate those, or to ask you to pretend that they're not happening, or to never talk about them. But we must understand, as the Israelites didn't, that God is watching over all things, and all things are happening for a reason. It may not be for us to ever fully understand why every little action in our life happens in the vast tapestry of God's plans, but we do know that there *is* a tapestry. We are never left abandoned by our Heavenly Father. The Israelites complain ultimately because they think God has abandoned them.

Our Nehemiah reading testifies to this - verse 17 goes on to say that God is always 'ready to forgive, slow to anger' and that he did not forsake them. In fact, he even provided food (manna) for their needs in the midst of their doubts. He remained faithful when they were not.

The second way we see the Israelites forgetting God is that they begin to put God to the test. This is in some way a progression further on from the complaining - it's moving from 'We think God has abandoned us' to, 'Let's find out for sure'. There is a lack of trust in God's timing and God's ways being shown. Firstly, corporately, the people as a group by demanding food and water (as we see in the Psalm we read today, in verse 18). They don't say, 'God, we are hungry and thirsty, we know that you know that, and we trust that you will provide for us in your timing and in your way' - they demand food NOW. They force the issue and try to take control for themselves. They were, as verse 17 of our Nehemiah passage continues, 'not mindful of the wonders that you [God] performed among them'. They had forgotten that in their time of need back at the Red Sea, that God had made a way for them to go on. They had forgotten that, when they were lost, God had provided a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide them. This culminates further on the journey to Moses himself, God's appointed leader who had heard God SPEAK to him directly in the Burning Bush and on Mount Sinai, hearing the complaints of the Israelites so much that he himself disobeyed God by striking a rock to get them water instead of speaking to it as God had commanded him to - speaking being an example of obeying God and praying in faith for sustenance, and the striking acting as a very obvious forcing of the issue, and a disobedience.

What are some ways in our lives that we try to 'force the issue'? Do we run out of patience waiting for God's timing? Do we walk into something without prayer and due preparation? Do we think we know best without God at all? And particularly during this time of Coronavirus pandemic, where we are all feeling the difficulties of lockdown in various ways, whether it be loneliness, economic difficulty, etc etc. do we try to make things happen that the situation is not ready for? Do we allow ourselves to be lost in the news reports and statistics, and fall into hopelessness? Do we even yearn for a return to 'normal life' to such an extent that we take dangerous actions to force that reality upon ourselves and others whom it may harm? If God is using this time, as he has been using this entire age since Pentecost, to call out a people of faith in Jesus Christ to be saved, and we through our selfish desire to return to a life we are comfortable with, attempt to intrude upon that, potentially pushing somebody away from the faith, or bringing someone to a premature death before they have received Christ, what does that say about our hearts, about our love for God and for neighbor?

But yet again here, just as God provided manna for the Israelites even in the midst of their complaining, God, even though he was tested by Moses striking the rock, he was turned into a 'circus act' and expected to perform miraculous party tricks at the Israelites' beck-and-call, still provided the water (the sustenance) in the midst of difficulty and lack of faith.

So the Israelites complain. The Israelites test God. Finally, the Israelites forget God by actively desiring to return to slavery. Verse 17 of our Nehemiah passage goes on to say that the Israelites, 'appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt'. We reach the climax of their doubting - they've moved from, 'We think God has abandoned us', to 'Let's see if we're right' to, 'God has abandoned us, let's go back'. Some context here - the Book of Numbers, which charts this entire journey, has the Israelites send scouts ahead to the land of Canaan, that land 'flowing with milk and honey' (they'd made it!) in Chapter 13 to see what they're up against. Now remember at this point God has already promised to deliver them safely into

the Promised Land and drive the already-present tribes out. In Chapter 14, the spies have returned with the news that the Canaanites are vast in number and mighty in battle. In fact, the spies conspire to lie - Caleb thinks they can take the Canaanites, but everyone else says that they're much too strong, and so they exaggerate or add some flourish to their report.

The people then respond - not with faith that God has promised to protect them, but by complaining (again!) that they would have been better off dying in Egypt, and even desiring to elect a new leader to replace Moses to take them back, absolutely attempting to take control of a situation which seems hopeless and in which God is completely forgotten.

The Israelites had forgotten, as our Nehemiah reading goes on again to say, that God 'gave your [his] good Spirit to instruct them', and sustained them for forty years in the wilderness before they reached Canaan - 'they lacked nothing - their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell'. Maybe we've imagined the Exodus as something of a glorified camping trip. These people literally had nothing but the clothes on their back as they left Egypt, and God had kept them fed, watered, and walking in health for forty years. And now that they've REACHED the Promised Land, in the face of one last strong-looking enemy they forget it all and want to go back.

They want to go back to what they know, to what they've experienced before - even though they all are fully aware that a life of slavery is very far from an enjoyable one. Stepping out into a great unknown is too much for them, even with forty years of God's faithful sustenance behind them. Our own lives of faith walking with Christ are a great unknown each and every day. This may be an internal unknown, as the Holy Spirit makes us aware of our sins, our need to confess and repent of them, our need to allow him to change us. It may be an external unknown of an almost infinite number of possibilities in which we could be called in our lives to bear witness to our faith in word and/or deed. We've all been there - when things are tough, it can be easy to slide back into familiar, though damaging, behaviors - addictions, or actions that 'feel good' but do damage to ourselves and others, and damage our relationship with God, put us at a distance from him so that we increasingly feel that we are 'not worthy' of him and can come nowhere near him, perpetuating a cycle. The Israelites failed to see what God was doing in delivering them from destruction by the Canaanites, and we often fail to give space to what God might be doing through trying times.

But yet again, in response to this mass rebellion, God still does not abandon them, or hand them all over to the Canaanites. He certainly does promise that Moses nor any others that have seen God's miracles through the forty-year period will enter the Promised Land due to their hardness of heart, but their sons and daughters will. God still remains faithful even in the midst of, as Numbers puts it, 'all the congregation' (everybody's!) lack of faith, and keeps his promise.

What is his promise to us then? We have no Promised Land to enter into after a time wandering the wilderness...or do we? We in fact too are being led by God via a representative leader through a period of trial, and given heavenly sustenance as we move towards the land promised by him - the life of the age to come. The parable of the Feeding of the Five Thousand read today has important things to tell us about this journey: That our

Lord Jesus Christ can do miraculous, saving deeds with just a mustard seed of faith, as he fed thousands with two loaves and five fish. That he feeds us now with his manna, the bread of heaven, into an eternity of being completely satisfied in him. But most importantly in this parable, Jesus does not feed the Five Thousand (plus all of the women and children don't forget!), or heal their sick, because of anything that they have done to earn it, but because he 'had compassion on them' (v14). They only come into his presence and are open and willing to receive what he has for them.

In this ongoing time of pandemic, are we feeling the strain of lockdown and wandering towards forgetting God's promises of sustenance and salvation? Are we more concerned with our own immediate wants, and attempting to preserve an old way of life as much as we can, even to the detriment of others, and not seeking how God may be using this time, and desiring to use us, to further his Kingdom? He may be inspiring us to meet the material and spiritual needs of so many around us in sudden, deep difficulty. He may be inspiring us as churches, as the Church, to be forced outside of these four walls and *be* the Church 'out there' to so many who desperately need the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Whatever it is: Are you in the presence of Christ, and open to receive whatever he has for you, or are you holding onto a stiff-neckedness and hardness of heart? Are you like Peter walking on the water, starting to look down at the reality of what's happening and sinking? Don't forget that it is in that moment of sinking that Christ reaches out and holds Peter up. Now this is not coercion - Peter could have not even gotten off the boat and rejected Jesus completely, but once he is in the water and walking towards Jesus...God remains faithful even in our own times of lack of faith. If you are a Christian, hold onto that, and if you are not a Christian, then seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you. There is a yolk and a burden, but in the words of our Lord himself, it is easy, it is light...and in it, you will find rest for your souls.

Amen.