

September 18, 2011

SCRIPTURE: Hebrew Bible: Exodus 16: 2-15
Epistle: Philippians 1: 21-30
Gospel: Matthew 20: 1-16

MEDITATION:
Disaster? Or Opportunity?

How often in our lives do we wonder whether we are facing a DISASTER or an OPPORTUNITY? It is sometimes hard to make a clear discernment between these two. What might seem like a disaster can turn out to be the best thing that happens to us. On the other hand some situation that seems to be just what we want can sometimes turn out to be a disappointment and maybe even lead us into disaster. It's hard to know.

When I was a child my Father introduced me to many little inspirational sayings and poems. I didn't understand as a child, but as I grew older I often wondered if his experience as a front line service man during the 2nd World War influenced his thinking and he found some kind of solace in reading these various words and then passed them on to his children. I can't remember a lot of them any longer but I do remember snippets such as:

I cried because I had no shoes until I saw a man who had no feet. OR
I cried because I had no coat until I saw a man who had no arms OR.
the famous words of Rudyard Kipling in IF
If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you OR
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you and yet make allowance for their doubting to OR
If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same.....

My Dad wasn't one to sit you down and lecture in some high faulting way but I now know how important those moments of learning were for my brothers and me. Dad had seen the worst that humanity can do to each other and yet he taught us that in the worst there is still something to be found that assured him of the inherent good of humanity.

God knew something about this in his encounters with the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. What had seemed like such a liberating release from the horrors of slavery soon was lost in the people's concern about what they would eat or drink. Looking back, life in Egypt didn't seem so bad after all. They even accused God of wanton cruelty to bring them out of Egypt only to let them starve to death in the desert. And they, like we sometimes do, looked back and exaggerated how much BETTER things were in the olden days. All of a sudden Egypt wasn't a place where they suffered but rather a place. "where they sat around pots of meat and ate all they wanted" I can imagine our ancient God being somewhat bewildered by this! Pots of meat??? I doubt it! And what does God do –

God responds to their grumbling by sending them what they are most in need of. Quail in the evening and bread from heaven in the morning – all they could eat and more. The God who is accused does not respond in anger but rather goes on in steadfast love and concern for the people. God stays with the people no matter what they do. This is a God who is willing to come down to the people rather than see them suffer.

Here once again the plot thickens. The people recognized the quail but the manna was unknown to them and they asked “What is it?” The word for this is Manhu – manna - literally What is it? Manna from heaven. They didn’t recognize it at first as something good from God but in desperation they were moved to try it and lo and behold they found that it was indeed good tasty and would sustain them. God had not abandoned them after all. They were assured and had the courage to keep going on and maybe they even realized that looking back with rose colored vision was not the way to go after all!

“What is it?” in our lives. Is it a horrible injustice and disaster? Is it human meanness and cruelty? Is it useless grumbling and blaming others? Is it an opportunity for revenge and vindication OR is it an opportunity to see something new and wonderful? Does God come to us in our need and answer our grumbling? I believe God ALWAYS does, we just don’t always recognize the possibilities because we are so busy grumbling and looking at what once was through those rose colored glasses. We fail to see and know God is right in the midst of our triumph or disaster. It is in those wilderness moments that we most need to realize that God has NOT abandoned us but is right along side offering something that we just haven’t recognized yet.

I think that is what my Dad was trying to teach me! It isn’t about the circumstance but rather about the faith that gets us through the circumstance. God can take any wilderness and make something beautiful out of it.

And then Jesus takes it a little farther. As Jesus often did in his teachings. Our ancient ancestors are just like we are. They look around and question “Is this fair?” Didn’t I give more than the next guy? Didn’t I try harder, give more, and work harder and longer than the other? How come the other gets the same as me? Have you ever had those moments and those thoughts? Of course you have ... We all have had those moments and we can justify them with great skill can’t we? But Jesus won’t let us get away with that! The last will be first and the first will be last! What a novel idea!!! I don’t really think Jesus was teaching about who should get what but rather challenging us to think about our attitudes and to take that task very seriously. Human life is a complicated dance of inward looking and outward action. It’s no easy thing to take in the lessons of Jesus and integrate them into our every day thinking and action. Most of what Jesus asks of us just does not fit into our modern way of being. We think more in terms of “earning” what we get and being rewarded for our efforts. **IF WE GIVE WE SHOULD GET! IF WE WORK HARD WE SHOULD BE REWARDED! IF WE ARE GOOD WE SHOULD NOT SUFFER.** But which one of us doesn’t know that it just doesn’t work that way. Whether we deserve it or not God is with us. Whether we have earned it or not God does not leave us alone. Whether we grumble or complain and are less than thankful for all the blessings that we already have, God is willing to give us more.

Paul suffered terribly at the end of his life. And he stayed faithful. He struggled, he pondered about his fate but he stayed faithful. And even in his great suffering he wrote to the infant church in Philippi to give them courage in the face of the persecution they were experiencing. Remember Paul once persecuted Christians himself. It was a time of social political and religious upheaval. Things were not as they once had been when Jesus was with them. Paul was able to be open and honest with the folks to whom he wrote. His honesty allowed them to be honest with each other as well. Paul knew that it wasn't only about struggle but also about joy. Paul assured them that no human circumstance would ultimately separate him or them from God's presence and love. Paul encouraged them to stay strong, to keep on spreading the good news. And we are given the same message. We can't give up. We can't stop learning and striving to understand the lessons. God is with us. We can achieve God's work and wonder.

And me.... Well I keep on trying too and I try to remember, "I cried because I had no shoes until I saw the man who had no feet"

AMEN .