

Sweetening the Water

Exodus 15:20-25

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test.

Some scholars hold that the story of the Bible really begins with Exodus instead of Genesis. (See Bernard Anderson's Understanding the Old Testament.) Scholars of the Bible believe that the story of God's people actually begins in Exodus, even though it comes after the book of Genesis in the canon. Scholars believe that it wasn't until going through the Exodus that the Hebrews thought of themselves as one people. Of course after they experienced this amazing event and began to think of themselves as a unified people- why then they wanted to tell stories about where they came from.

And so it's the Exodus, not Genesis, that really begins to the story for God's people. And moreover, scholars tell us that the Exodus story itself went through transformation over time with different layers recorded in the Bible. Many scholars believe the most ancient scripture this ancient book is the Song of Miriam- this two line poem we heard this morning. "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

And do you know, it makes sense to me- how everything started with Exodus and grew from there. It makes sense, because it's an astounding story, right? The Hebrews start out as slaves working for Pharaoh. Then, they follow Moses out of Egypt. During the day there's a column of smoke rising up in front of Moses; at night a pillar of flame. The people have this direct experience of the presence of God- fire they can feel and smoke they can smell. And then, of course, there's the actual Exodus itself- God blows the wind across the water and divides it up, so much so the Hebrews can walk across on dry land. And then, when the Egyptians pursue- the water smashes down on top of them drowning them in the sea. It's just a phenomenal story- one that shaped the people of God in the deepest way.

Our story, the American story- it didn't start on September 11th, 2001. But our story was fundamentally changed that crisp fall day. Every single one of us knows exactly where we were when we heard the news. I was just starting a new congregation outside of Austin, Texas. And the Presbytery had sent me to what was called Church Multiplication Boot Camp in Colorado Springs. I remember gathering with strangers in a hotel lobby watching the towers come down in these huge TV's feeling very far from Melissa, very far from home. And of course I couldn't fly back home either and every rental car within miles was snapped up within hours.

But something happened to our country in the wake of 9/11, didn't it? Something extraordinary. We saw one another not as an inconvenience, but as fellow Americans. We viewed strangers as friends we just hadn't yet met. The guy I was traveling with let

everyone at the conference know we were from Texas and stranded, and within seconds a couple of Texans approached us and said they're car wasn't real big, but we'd be welcome. (Of course they didn't tell us they also had a literal obsession with Waffle House, which is kind of a Southern institution, and we had to stop at literally every Waffle house we passed. But hey, it was their car, and we weren't really in a position to object.)

If you ask me where was God on 9/11, it's an easy question to answer: God was in our response. God was in our response to this unspeakable moment. We saw God in firemen and policemen who ran into those towers to save lives- even as those towers were falling down around them. We saw God in the rescue workers and their dogs who worked tirelessly to sift through the wreckage to save those that could be found, and to collect the remains they could for the families left behind. We saw God in the people who had no other choice but to jump from the towers, but who held hands as they fell. They held hands- they kept community even in their final moments. We saw God in the churches, synagogues, and yes, mosques that opened their doors and turned their buildings into communications headquarters, trauma centers, blood banks, and prayer circles. We saw God in the spirit of unity and togetherness that was palpable.

And it wasn't just us. It wasn't just America. The French newspaper LaMonde published a headline in enormous block letters the very next day: We Are All Americans. Now friends, when the FRENCH are in solidarity with Americans- only God could bring such a thing about.

Our country's history may not have started with 9/11, but we were forever changed by that day and in the days that followed. We caught a glimpse of the courage, of the unity, of the beauty, of which we are capable.

And this is what happened to the Hebrews, too. Some scholars believe that the term 'Hebrew' comes from the Egyptian word 'Habiru'. The Habiru in Egypt were a kind of underclass- it was this ethnically mixed group of people captured by the Egyptians and then put into slavery. And the miracle of the Exodus wasn't just that the waters parted and the Egyptians were defeated- it was that the Habiru, this disparate group of strangers, became the Hebrews, the Israelites, by journeying together in the sight of God. In this extraordinary event the Habiru became one Hebrew people.

Which is why what happens in the next verses is so shocking. Fresh from walking across the red sea, just verses away from God appearing to them in smoke and fire- the Israelites move on; literally and figuratively. They move on literally into the wilderness of Shur. But emotionally they've moved on as well- they've had enough of the songs and the tambourines and the dancing. They've had enough of Moses. They've had enough of God.

You know that because of what happens. They've been walking along for three days, and they finally come across some water. They finally come across this body of water. And, thrilled beyond belief to find water in the desert, some of them dip their hands into the water to taste it. But do you know what? It doesn't taste all that great. It doesn't taste all that great, and rather than just say, you know, some water is better than

no water, rather than be grateful for what they have- they immediately snarl at Moses asking him what they're supposed to drink.

Now friends, the water wasn't toxic. It wasn't going to kill them. It just didn't taste very good. A few years Melis and I went to this really nice Italian place off of Alberta, Ciao Vito. And we knew it was not going to be a normal dining experience when I ordered a sparkling water. Normally, if a place has sparkling water at all, it'll be Pellegrino, which is just fine. So, I order a sparkling water, and the waitress goes: "Ah excellent, which one do you want?" And I'm like, "There's a choice?" And she smiles, and says, "Oh yes, we carry many fine waters here." And Melis and I share a look like, Oh DO you, now? And so I say, "So, uh, tell me about them." And she rattles off a list- honestly, it's like a wine list. And I go, "Well, I'm not really an aquaphile *per se*. Um, what would you recommend?" And immediately she says, "Oh, the Voss. Definitely the Voss. It has a tight effervescence." Honestly people- she described water as having a 'tight effervescence'. I mean you can't make this kind of thing up. Every time Melis and I feel like a place is kind of silly and foo foo, we'll wonder aloud whether their water has a tight effervescence or not.

This is what the people are like. They're tasting this water, and it's just not quite up to their standards. We don't know what was wrong with it exactly, although you can bet this water's effervescence was not NEARLY up to par. But, the water's not poisonous. It won't kill them. And you're thinking, "Really? The Lord God just parted the waters of the Red Sea for you. Yesterday you were slaves and today you aren't. And you're upset that the water tastes a little funky?" All of that unity, all of that awe they experienced- gone in just three short days.

And are we that different? How long did it take us to lose our sense of national unity? In the days after 9/11 our congress was about as divided between Republicans and Democrats as it is today, yet they were able to set aside differences and speak with one voice. And we the people? In the days after 9/11 we measured ourselves not by how big our flat screen TV's were, but by how big our hearts were, how big our willingness to share was. It truly seemed possible in the days after 9/11 to realize the true American dream is bigger than owning a larger house with granite counter tops; the true American dream is being one people, indivisible, a people who treasure liberty and justice for all. But instead we've traded that dream for a nightmare of selfish consumerism; we've allowed the angriest, most out of touch voices dominate our national conversation; and we may remember the day the fallen lost their lives 10 years ago, but we have not honored them by leading lives worthy of their sacrifice.

Well, if we were shocked by the behavior, the ingratitude of the Israelites- God's response is even more surprising. I would expect God to just come down and just crush them- or at least be really angry with them. Wouldn't you? "You know, I saved you from Pharaoh, I brought you out of slavery, and all you can say in response to me is the water stinks?"

But God doesn't. God doesn't respond in anger at all. No, God looks down, hears their complaint, their whiny complaint, and rather than rumble at them, God tells Moses to pick up some sweet smelling wood, drop it in the water, and solve the problem.

Now notice God doesn't come down and do it for them. In their ingratitude, their blindness, they have lost the ability to experience God's presence so directly. God is no longer a column of smoke and a pillar of fire. And this distance, this sense of absence is a loss- no doubt about it. But God doesn't abandon them, either. God works through one of them, through Moses, a poor speaker with unclean hands, to sweeten the water.

And I believe that's how it is with us as well. We may have lost that heady sense of God's presence in the days after 9/11- we may have lost some of that Spirit that enabled us to care for one another so easily, but God has not abandoned us. God has not abandoned us at all- and God works through us to sweeten the waters around us.

The very first man pulled out of the wreckage was a priest- a chaplain to the New York City Fire Department by the name of Father Mychal Judge. He ran into the North Tower alongside the other with whom he served. When the South Tower collapsed it sent debris flying everywhere- and Father Mychal was hit. Five firemen who came in after Father Mychal saw him lying there covered in dust and debris. Their hearts in their throats they surrounded him, picked him out of the rubble, and gently carried him out- the North Tower falling just minutes after they made it out.

Father Michael Duffy, Mychal Judge's friend and fellow priest, gave the homily. He recalled how his friend always surprised him by how many people he knew- from the homeless to Mayor Giuliani, Father Mychal just seemed to know everybody. Of course he was easy to spot. See, even from a distance you knew it was him, because he carried this black satchel around. He carried it around because he would write these little notes to everyone he knew all the time. Just one or two lines on a card whenever he heard

something about someone or was holding them in prayer. And of course he'd always get these big letters back. And he kept them in that black satchel. What made the loss of Father Mychal so keen- was that his life sweetened the waters, the lives of so many others around him.

Father Duffy preached these words, these words I believe to be as holy and relevant today as they were ten years ago. He writes: Mike loved to bless people — and I mean physically — even if they didn't ask. A little old lady would come up to him, and he would put his big thick Irish hands around her and press her head 'til I think the poor woman would be crushed.

He would say to me once and a while, 'Michael Duffy' — he always called me by my full name — 'Michael Duffy, you know what I need?'

And I would get excited, because it was hard to buy him a present or anything. I said, 'No, what?'

'You know what I really need?'

'No. What, Mike?'

'Absolutely nothing. I don't need a thing in the world. I am the happiest man on the face of the earth. Why am I so blessed? I don't deserve it.'

Mychal Judge's body was the first one released from Ground Zero. His death certificate has the number '1' on the top. Of the thousands of people who perished in that terrible holocaust, why was Mychal Judge number one? I think I know the reason. Mychal's goal and purpose in life was to bring the firemen to the point of death so they would be ready to meet their maker. And he could not have ministered to them all. It was physically impossible — in this life.

In the next few weeks, we're going to have name after name of people who are being brought out of that rubble. And Mychal Judge is going to be on the other side of death — to greet them, instead of to send them.

And so, we may bury Myke Judge's body, but not his spirit. We may bury his voice, but not his message. We may bury his hands, but not his good works. We may bury his heart, but not his love. Never his love. (<http://www.npr.org/2011/09/09/140293993/slain-priest-bury-his-heart-but-not-his-love>)

Beloved, it isn't too late to live lives that honor the dead. It's never too late. God is still in our midst, waiting for us to throw our wood into the water. The water around us is so bitter right now- what can you do to sweeten it? **Amen.**