

Scripture:

Psalm 121

Exodus 17:1-7

“Journey by stages.”

Lauren Winner ---- Orthodox Jew ---- turned Christian --- and now Anglican priest writes ---- “I am beginning to learn that I am a small character in a story that is always fundamentally about God.”

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What a great and concise way to describe a life of faith ----- “I am a small character in a story that is always about God.”

“I am a small character in a story that is always about God.”

Wouldn't that look great on a grave stone ---- “I was a small character in a story that was all about God.” ----- I'd be good with my life being described like that --- “I was a small character in a story that was all about God.

The truth is --- the story is always about God --- our lives are always fundamentally about God.

We too often make the all too human and self centered mistake of thinking that it is our story --- our lives --- and that God is involved with us and what we're doing --- instead of the other way around ---- where we are involved in God's story ----- and where it's all about Him.

When Lauren Winner declares ---- “I am beginning to learn that I am a small character in a story that is always fundamentally about God.” --- I want to shout something like ----- “Hallelujah --- Amen --- me too sister.”

It's not about us --- our lives are not chiefly and primarily about us ----- they are first and foremost all about God and His story.

And the more we are able to shift our perspective from us as the centre with God orbiting around us ---- to God as the centre with us orbiting around Him --- the sooner we engage in true and faithful discipleship.

And of course very often this crucial transition from ---- “God in our lives” -
----- to ---- “Our lives in God’s story” ----- happens in stages.

The first line from our reading from Exodus today reads this way in the NRSV version of the Bible ----- “From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.”

“From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.”

In other words it happened in stages --- they journeyed stage by stage -----
----- step by step.

Our Lenten path leads through the wilderness ----- through stages of
wilderness ----- towards the cross.

Our Lenten path leads through the wilderness towards the cross.

And there are stages.

In Exodus 17 we pick up the Israelites ----- continuing on in their journey to
The Promised Land.

They have been freed by God ----- from the Egyptians ----- slavery under
Pharaoh.

And they have been delivered from slavery --- literally ---- and now God is
going to free them from spiritual slavery --- the slavery of wanting things to
happen their way ----- and in their time – instead of trusting in God to
handle things and in His time.

And this journey of freedom from spiritual enslavement ---- takes 40 years.

40 years ----- it takes God a lot longer to free them spiritually ----- they
were freed physically in less than a day ----- God opened the waters up -----

they passed through ----- and then God closed the waters off and washed away the Egyptian army in hot pursuit.

God has already saved them --- they are well on their way to The Promised Land --- the land flowing with milk and honey.

And God ---- on more than one occasion has already saved them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm --- isn't that a great image ---- a great Biblical image --- God's mighty hand and outstretched arm.

God has already saved and freed the Israelites --- but spiritually they are still incarcerated ---- trapped by their own selfishness and self centeredness.

Understandable they groaned about slavery in Egypt ----- but now they are free --- traveling home --- to a new home --- the very best of the very best --- The Promised Land --- a land flowing with milk and honey --- another great and powerful Biblical image.

They are well on their way to the joyous ----- free ----- plentiful ---- new existence that God promised and what are they doing ----- they're whining --- they're self centered --- short visioned --- very limited and narrow perspective.

And we can dress it up --- right it off ----- justify it --- all we want ----- they were in the desert it was hot ---- they were having a bad day ---- they didn't deserve this ----- do you know how tough their childhood was ----- high school was rough ---- and so on ---- we're pretty good at justifying things --- --- but in the end they are whining ----- they're acting like a bunch of whiners.

“Free us God please.” --- they plead --- slavery was awful ---- for sure.

So God frees them.

And then as they travel it's ---“This is awful too!” --- “Can we just go back to being slaves again ----- at least then we had food and water ---- Pharaoh fed us at least.”----- and of course he did feed them.

Pharaoh made sure they had food and water otherwise they wouldn't have been able to work and he couldn't drive them harder.

And so God --- see Exodus 16 just before our reading today --- and so as they whine about wanting to go back to Egypt ----- and the slavery they detested --- as they whine about having food in Egypt ----- God acts --- and they have manna --- bread --- and quail --- fowl --- meat.

And they are given this manna and quail --- this bread and meat ----- just as they were freed from slavery --- miraculously --- and at the hand of God.

And so they're happy for a little bit.

And then we find them a bit later --- our reading for today --- whining again.

Anxious --- lacking trust in Moses --- lacking trust in God.

They're thirsty.

And rather than say something like ----

“Lord God almighty you are so great as we have already seen ---- over and over and over again.

And you are --- steadfast is your love.

And you are compassionate and loving ---- you have saved us --- you have saved us your beloved people over and over again.

And so we are grateful and thankful.

You are our God and we are your people.

So please Lord ---- won't you listen to us once again.

In your love and mercy --- be kind and gracious to us as you always have been.

You have led us out of Egypt --- freed us from slavery ---- and even when we grumbled ----- you were slow to anger and so rich in mercy.

When we were hungry in the desert just a few days ago ----- you fed us --- and we were stuffed.

And now here we are coming before you once again humbly God --- please give us some water ---- for we are thirsty ---- so thirsty.”

But no this isn't how the saved people of Israel come to God.

Instead this is how they come --- anxious and whining ----

Verse 2 ---- “So they quarreled with Moses and said ----“Give us water to drink.”

And then the very next verse --- verse 3 ----- “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

Talk about ungrateful ----

“Quarrelling with Moses --- the one God has chosen ---- in other words quarrelling with God Himself ---- they bark out ----- “Give us water to drink?”

And then they bark out -----““Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

And remember these are the same people who barked out --- “Why don’t you free us?” --- In Egypt.

First it was ---- “Why don’t you free us?” ---- now it’s ---- “Why don’t you enslave us again ---- at least then we had food.”

Anyway you look at it they are whining.

And as is so often the case they start to pile things on to Moses and blame Moses --- instead of looking at themselves --- whiners always look to someone else --- and so they go to Moses and blame him.

But Moses isn’t the real leader --- Moses is an agent of God.

God is the one who is responsible for the mismatch between expectation and delivery.

This little line is both crucial to the story and crucial to life.

Here it is again ----- “God is the one who is responsible for the mismatch between expectation and delivery.”

“God is the one who is responsible for the mismatch between expectation and delivery.”

We have expectations ---- we have expectations and we want God to deliver --
- we want God in our lives more than we sometimes want to give our lives
over to God.

Very often we ---- just as the Israelites did over and over and over again ----
very often we feel that there is a mismatch between what we want and
expect ---- and what God delivers.

We want God in our lives ----- but we are reluctant to give them over to God
totally.

We want --- such and such ----- to happen ---- in the church --- at work ----
at home whatever.

And when it doesn't ----- we feel cheated.

We have expectations --- and when we feel that they aren't being met --- we
get frustrated and upset ---- anxious --- perhaps we even begin to whine a bit
like the Israelites did.

When the people challenge Moses ----- we want food we want water ----
how can you do this to us --- they are really challenging and questioning
God.

In the Exodus ----- the book and the event ----- Moses and all of Israel is
beginning to notice that God isn't just a "sugar daddy" --- who gives them
what they want they want it.

They have expectations and they want Moses and God to deliver --- it's that
simple to them.

It's all about them --- God freed us from slavery --- then we were hungry as
we traveled.

And when we were hungry God fed us --- and now we are thirsty so come
on God --- give us what we want ---- and give it to us now.

Me ---- me --- me --- me ----- whine ---- whine ----- whine ---- whine ----
whine --- whine ---- whine.

They see God acting for them --- God is in their story ----- they are the centre --- and they are the fulcrum around which everything moves --- including God ---- and that is sad --- very sad.

“I am beginning to learn that I am a small character in a story that is always fundamentally about God.”

God’s response to the people is abrupt and decisive.

Picking it up at verse 5 ---

“The Lord answered Moses ---- Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for people to drink.”

God’s response to their whining is abrupt and decisive --- and also a little bit ludicrous --- if we stop to think about it.

The whiners are whining once again ----- “We want and you’re not delivering God.”

The whiners are whining again --- and God says ----- “Go to a rock and whack it with a stick and water will suddenly come gushing out of it.”

And make no mistake about it --- the command is terse and non-negotiable -- - God isn’t negotiating and discussing things here ---- He is acting.

Go and do it ----- God says to Moses.

“Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for people to drink.”

God speaks ----- Moses obeys --- God delivers ----- water comes --- and the people drink.

God sustained their lives ----- it was lean and precarious ----- anxiety provoking for many --- and it required deep trust.

And the last part is the most important part ----- it required deep trust.

It was lean ---- yes --- precarious --- yes --- and anxiety provoking ----- everybody seemed to get all of that part ----- AND --- and this is the most important part ----- and ----- it required deep trust ---- and that was where most of the people fell off --- at the deep trust part.

Moses had deep trust ----- and it would seem the elders did too ----- they went with Him to whack the rock with a stick --- hoping --- believing for water.

The people on the other hand ---- test and provoke --- challenge and doubt -- -- and quite frankly they whine.

And in case you haven't picked up on it yet ---- I can't stand whining.

Whining is like ---- well it's whining.

The people want guarantees ---- they don't want to trust God --- they want God to give them some guarantees.

They want God to produce --- and produce --- and produce ----- and meet their needs when they want them met --- they don't really trust Him at all --- they want guarantees.

God has already freed them ---- saved them ----fed them ---- led them --- and often miraculously --- with mighty miracles.

But they seem to have forgotten that --- they want more proof --- and they want what they want now.

And they didn't really want to journey as the Lord commanded they wanted to journey as they commanded ----- free us now --- thank you --- food now -- - thank you --- water now ---- thank you.

Actually forget the thank you's --- it's really just free us now ---- feed us now --- and water now --- come on God do it how we want it --- and do it now.

They are the centre --- not God.

It's ---- "God work in my life --- my story." --- and not --- "God I'm a part of your story ----- your life."

They weren't --- at least initially --- they weren't at all about seeing themselves as small characters in a story that is always fundamentally about God.

They were however beginning to learn ----- that it isn't all about them ----- that they are in fact small characters in a bigger story --- God's story.

"From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded."

They were journeying by stages --- and they were journeying by stages as God commanded.

God was fashioning them to move away from them having expectations that they simply wanted God to meet.

Gad was fashioning them to move away from --- "I want this ---- and I want it now God so hurry up now."

Gad was fashioning them to get out of the driver's seat and trust in Him.

This passage is a great reminder that people ----- us ---- the Israelites ----- are anxious about the source of our faith.

The Israelites need reminding again and again and again ---- we often need reminding again and again and again.

This is a story about God providing water to a stiff necked --- impossible ---- ---- and I've got to say it one more time ---- whining people ---- who have already been saved.

They have so much to be thankful and grateful for but all they do is complain --- no matter what God did these were the people who all they ever do is complain.

It's all already been done for them if they would just trust and be positive for just one time.

They forever thirst for a tangible reminder of God's guidance.

They need to experience God's saving work over and over and over again --- the very minute they feel any distance from God they demand more signs more proof --- more sugar from the sugar daddy God.

And the amazing --- and wonderful ---- and beautifully powerful thing is God always delivers.

The water from the rock is a tangible reminder that God's salvation is always at hand --- even when it is hidden from view.

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That's the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for today ----- God's salvation is always at hand --- even when it is hidden from view.

That's the message of the cross ----- hidden as it may have seemed ----- God hanging on a pole ---- naked ---- beaten ----- tried to be wiped off the face of the earth --- crucified ----- the hidden message of this grotesque act is eternal salvation.

God's love and salvation are always at hand ---- even when they are hidden from view ----- and we have to have a little faith --- and trust in God even when we aren't feeling it.

Israel is led to trust in God ----- God's people are led to trust in Him ----- even when everything around them --- us --- points to the impossible.

God had Moses whack a rock with a stick in the desert and water gushed out of it.

Moses' trust in God led to the impossible --- water from a rock.

Salvation --- eternal life --- comes from the impossible ----- death.

“From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.”

Only they didn't want it by stages --- and they didn't really want to follow the Lords' commands ---- they wanted it now --- and they wanted it by their command.

Imagine saying to the leader --- or essentially God as the God chose the leader ---- “Give us what we want --- and give it to us now.”

Imagine saying to Moses ---- saying to God ----
----- “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

and then

--- “Give us water to drink.”

Well that's what they said ----- look at verses 2 and 3 today.

God has led them ---- fed them ---- freed them ----- and saved them --- He's been right threw with them all the way.

Moses has been the one God chose to lead them ---- feed them ---- free ---- and save them.

And they treat Him poorly ---- Him Moses --- and Him God.

They demand --- they become impatient --- they whine ---- they complain --- they get anxious --- they are demanding --- very demanding.

As if God owes them something --- as if Moses owes them something.

It took 40 years of whining and wandering and journeying in the desert before God felt that the people were finally ready --- spiritually ready --- emotionally ready ----- to enter into the Promised Land.

Take out a map sometime ----- look over the area they journeyed for 40 years ----- it's small --- it's really small.

They would have most certainly gone over the same ground over and over and over again in those 40 years.

God had to keep them wandering around and around and around ----- until their hearts finally softened up and opened up.

Maybe when we feel like we're going around and around and around --- it's because God is softening up our hearts and opening up our hearts too.

“From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.”

We too very often have to journey over the very same ground --- the very same circumstances --- over and over and over again --- before we are opened up to what God wants us to see and hear and experience.

“I am beginning to learn that I am a small character in a story that is always fundamentally about God.”

Maybe it took the Israelites 40 years to learn the Exodus wasn't really about them ---- and that it was all about God --- God working in and through them ---- God's plan involving them in a special way.

In the Exodus --- God pushed the Israelites away from themselves and more towards Him.

And they pushed back ----- they grumbled --- they got anxious ----- they were tired --- they wrestled with God --- they whined a lot.

But maybe just maybe they were opened up to the reality that it's all about God --- and how they ----- could participate in God's great story.

“From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.”

“I am beginning to learn that I am a small character in a story that is always fundamentally about God.”

They journeyed by stages --- and God was good to them --- so very good.

They began to learn that they were small characters in a story that was all about God ----- and God was good to them --- so very good.

They journeyed by stages ----- they began to learn that they were part of a story that was all about God --- and not just them.

And God was good to them --- so very good to them.

Amen.