

October 1, 2023  
Pentecost 18 – Proper 21A  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Exodus 17:1-7*

*Psalms 78:1-4, 12-16*

*Philippians 2:1-13*

*Matthew 21:23-32*

*In the Name of God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.*

This morning, we bump up against three blunt questions. “Is the Lord among us or not?” “By whose authority?” and “What do you think?”

“Is the Lord among us or not?” Once again today, we hear from our ancestors as they wander in the wilderness. Last week, they were hungry; this week, they are thirsty. And again, they mumble and grumble ... against Moses and against God.

It’s another variation of “were there not enough graves in Egypt??” And, once more, God tells Moses to go ahead of the people and do something that looks completely idiotic...to hit a rock with a stick. And, out of that seemingly senseless action springs water – where none had been before.

I think – no, let me rephrase that – I BELIEVE that God often (maybe even always) chooses to bring water – water, and the life it both symbolizes and makes possible – God CHOOSES to bring water out of something that is completely lifeless – a rock.

I believe that God intends – that God WILLS – to bring life to the people. Life, not the death they expect and fear. And that’s true not just way back there in Bible times. God wills to bring life to US – not the death that we, too, expect and fear.

The story of God’s saving action in the Exodus, and of God’s providence in the wilderness is the most repeated story in the Hebrew scriptures. 120 times, we are reminded of our corporate identity as God’s people. Out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, into the wilderness, across the centuries, and eventually ending up right here on the corner of Madison and Adams, God has always found ways to make life for God’s people burst forth in unexpected ways, and from surprising sources.

When you are tempted to despair, when you are tempted to grumble, “Is the Lord among us or not” you have only to look around you to see the faces of those you know and love in this place. Or to share a smile with someone who is new to our community. Or to sit at a table at Muncie Pride and hear story after story from young people who didn’t know that there was a church in Muncie that would welcome them, rather than condemn them. Or to ask someone to pray for you...and know that they will. Or to serve dinner to the guests God sends to Gathering Grace. If your eyes are open, the examples are many. And we can join with the Psalmist who sings, “We will recount to generations to come the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the LORD, and the wonderful works God has done.” “Is the Lord among us or not?” Yes, the Lord is!

## A Ω

The events in today's gospel occur just one day after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and clearing the money changers out of the Temple. So it's no surprise that when the chief priests and elders confront Jesus, they ask "by what authority" he does these things. Jesus (and you know how this goes) answers them with a question of his own, about the baptism of John. After deciding that they didn't have an answer that wouldn't make them look stupid, they said, "We don't know."

In response, Jesus turns the tables on them and says, "riddle me this!" Actually, the text says, "what do you think?" And he tells them a parable. This morning, I'm going to take a little liberty and paraphrase that parable; maybe we can hear something new.

We hear about a mother asking her daughter to go out and weed the garden. The daughter talks back with some version of, "whatever!" Then she pops her earphones in and stomps out of the house. Whatever her reasons might have been, I think we would all call her disobedient, if not downright disrespectful, right? Later in the day, though, she changes her mind, goes back home, and weeds that garden like there's no tomorrow.

Now the first girl has a sister. After earphone girl stomps out, her mother asks Sister #2 to do the weeding. Sister #2 says, "Yes, of course I will go out and tend to the garden!" *Now, we all say, this is more like it, isn't it?!* I am sure the mother is pleased, especially after the rude reply she got from her first daughter.

Of course, as we know, sister Goody-Two-Shoes also changes her mind. Instead of the garden, she hits the mall. She served her *own* interests by saying "yes, of course" to her mother. It made her look good...and it got her mother off her back! But she didn't even pretend to do what she had promised.

"What do *you* think?" When Jesus asks us what we think, it forces us to look in the mirror. Which child am I? What do I think? What do I believe? How do I act? And why? Am I making a deal with myself? Am I making a deal with God? The truth here is that actions actually *do* speak louder than words.

I believe that God calls us to right action because this is what God created us to be. Remember those words from the first chapter of Genesis "*let us make them in our own image.*" We are created by God out of love, and are destined by God to live in love, to live as love.

But we tend to let our self-interests get in our way. Our fears, which lead to ambition, competition, selfishness – all these, and more, cloud our vision of seeing what is right and doing it. At the same time, doing good primarily to avoid punishment is still putting our own fears and interests at the top of the list.

Well, darn it, if you put it like that, now we seem an awful lot like the people wandering in the desert! If, on one hand, our eyes are clouded by self-interest and, on the other hand, it is fear that motivates us to do good, what are we supposed to do as we wander this earth? In this case, we can turn to St. Paul.

## A Ω

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we hear him quoting one of the earliest hymns sung in the Church.<sup>1</sup> Christians were singing about their faith in Jesus *even before* Paul's letters were written.

Paul introduces the hymn with these words, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." It is essential to know that the "you" isn't singular, but plural. Paul is not writing to an individual person in Philippi, giving that person advice on how to live life in Christ. He is giving that advice to the entire Christian community.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who,  
though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has given us a model of what to do, of how to live in unselfish, non-transactional love. There is no tit-for-tat here. Jesus doesn't make a deal with God for a specific reward, or to avoid punishment. Instead, God pours himself out into human form for our sake *and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore ... God gave Jesus the name that is above every name.*

In the Name of Jesus, God strikes our rocky, hard hearts, causing his life and his love to gush forth through us into the world. "What do you think?" THIS is what we think. This is what we believe: that God always (**always**) brings life where we tend to see death.

What do we do? And by whose authority? In the Name of Jesus, live as if you *actually* believe it. Lean into encouragement, consolation, compassion, and sympathy. Francis of Assisi, whose feast we will celebrate on Wednesday, is thought to have said "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

In today's Collect, we ask for the fullness of God's grace. When you receive Holy Communion this morning, perhaps you might pray for the eyes to see the constant outpouring of God's grace into the hearts of this community, and to pray that that grace, that water of life, would flow through your hearts and minds, overflowing into a life of love and faithful service to God's hungry and hurting world. Let the same mind be in you (all) which was also in Christ Jesus, who poured himself out for the life of the world.

Let us pray. Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune our hearts to sing thy grace! Streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> I remember being blown away when I first began to explore this text years ago. I was captivated not only by its beauty, but also by the very fact that the Bible (particularly in Paul's letters and the Book of Revelation) preserves actual church practice.