Sermon from September 20, 2020

To be honest, I have heard very little complaining from anyone in this church about this very difficult time we have been going through since mid-March. It has become apparent to me that you all are very resilient people. You have weathered many storms in this church community with a grace that is pretty astounding to me. There may be complaining happening among you when you talk to one another and there may be complaining that you are lifting up to God to answer through your prayers. Complaint seems to go along with lament in the readings today. Here we have the Israelites who have been granted a newfound freedom, lamenting the oppression they just left. Living under Egyptian rule was familiar and looking backward they remember getting enough to eat. When you’re hungry that is usually all you can think about. I can’t say that I’ve ever experienced hunger for food at this level where I didn’t know when I would get food again. But for the Israelites they are literally worried about starving to death, in a wilderness that seems unforgiving. They beg Moses and Aaron to appeal to God for help. Their prayers are answered. They are provided by God with enough food to survive and instructions on how to utilize the food that has been given to them. They are given only what they can use in a single day they are to trust that God will provide every day. In a world that seems to value having more and more possessions and sometimes even gluttony this seems shocking. When the pandemic started people actually hoarded items such as toilet paper, cleaning supplies and yes food. There was not enough to go around because people took more than they needed out of fear of not having enough. In a world that values amassing wealth that one could ever use in a single lifetime this seems a little shocking to think that just having enough will be enough. Lack of food is not the only reason to complain and lament. Today I am lamenting the death of Ruth Bader Ginsberg a woman I have long admired and who has brought greater gender equality to this country. She was a woman of great courage and though her voice was soft her wit and her intellect spoke volumes about her strength. I know that the future of our country can’t be placed on the shoulders of one woman, and that the mantel of justice must be held up by those who are here but it’s a big loss to our country and the world.

There have been times in my life that I have gone through spiritual deserts when I could not sense God’s presence readily. Sometimes it was because of a block that I created through my own bitterness at how life seemed to be treating me, or a lack of resources such as money, good relationships or a variety of other things that I thought I needed. There are many things in our lives that can prevent us from seeing God’s presence right here and now in real time. Sometimes those things express a real and true need for something essential lacking in our lives. Moses and Aaron asked God to provide for the people in the wilderness and God did. How does God provide for us when we are experiencing a time in the wilderness? Paul tells us today that he would like to die so that he could be fully with Christ. The fact as Paul knows all too well is that our lives include periods of suffering. Periods of living in at least a metaphorical wilderness and periods of sometimes wondering if God is listening to our complaints and laments. Paul knows that God is present even when he is suffering and perhaps especially when he is suffering. God responds to us in our suffering but it sometimes is hard to see, hear, and feel initially. I have found in some of my darkest hours that it takes time both alone in meditation, reflection and prayer and time listening to some trusted friends and mentors that will eventually allow me to hear what God is saying to me. There have been periods of years in my life when I only caught glimpses of God. When and where do you catch glimpses of God? When have you felt God’s presence fully? One thing I know from chaplaincy is that if we don’t get the idea of what is important and what our priorities are now we will get them when we realize that our days here on earth are numbered. When I have a patient who is having a recurrence of cancer that has spread after several years of remission there is a reordering of priorities. A need to lift up the important things, voice the regrets but remember the positives, remember the light of God in one’s life. It is important to know when one is stripped of one’s ability to do and accomplish work related tasks anymore that what you have is enough. The relationships, the possessions, the nourishment you receive are enough and that God is present. God was present when the Israelites called for her. She answers and provides. We too are called to be the body of Christ in the world.

In our gospel today we hear a parable that stretches our notions of fairness and God’s generosity. We are told by many people, especially, white people of privilege that people who work hard are rewarded financially. However, if you talk to an immigrant working in a hot field all day and see what their wages are you know that this is not true. In fact, most of our hardest working people doing the most needed jobs are paid far less than a living wage in this country. For instance, the Nursing assistants or CNA’s in nursing facilities and hospitals are paid very minimally. The Environmental services personnel are not paid well. These positions are crucial to the needs of our elderly, sick and most vulnerable populations. So when we wonder why God chooses to reward those who have no work or are not picked until the very end of the day we should remember that all God’s people need a living wage to support themselves and their families. It’s hard not to complain to God when we feel vulnerable and when are needs are truly not being met. It’s hard to live through times such as these when our lives and the world in general feels uncertain in many respects. God meets our basic needs even in the midst of suffering. God knows what it is like to suffer and does not leave us during the hard times. All of us have been through hard times and struggled and even suffered at times in our lives. God promises to provide and to be present through it all. We need only look back and see that even though things have gotten difficult that we have somehow prevailed. We can see that God continues to show up and we continue to seek God’s presence and to make it known to others. I came across another beautiful poem by John O’Donohue recently that expresses this sentiment and the time we are going through better than I ever could:

[**The Cosmic Dancer**](https://www.facebook.com/thecosmicdancerpage/?__cft__%5B0%5D=AZVQ0rq-fAAcses2qxOZ7Ag6AF7C9FJjY08ArdOfjL-jl5566ajvnZhRSfXIQ9IKeynQzIdtduWezONwN3cq4T3X2MXe_Pia0-KTz_Xu1RLWp2AbgnUPgnBBsA4H8EhfFwyCAInKtHS3emAYIzdqm6F2rZsxr3MNVoMef7ZfVILCUwMGIL0VNoC0Md_DXIgL280&__tn__=-UC%2CP-y-R)

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You have been forced to enter empty time.

The desire that drove you has relinquished.

There is nothing else to do now but rest

And patiently learn to receive the self

You have forsaken for the race of days.

At first your thinking will darken

And sadness take over like listless weather.

The flow of unwept tears will frighten you.

You have traveled too fast over false ground;

Now your soul has come to take you back.

Take refuge in your senses, open up

To all the small miracles you rushed through.

Become inclined to watch the way of rain

When it falls slow and free.

Imitate the habit of twilight,

Taking time to open the well of color

That fostered the brightness of day.

Draw alongside the silence of stone

Until its calmness can claim you.

Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.

Learn to linger around someone of ease

Who feels they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, you will return to yourself,

Having learned a new respect for your heart

And the joy that dwells far within slow time.

~ John O'Donohue, "For One Who Is Exhausted, a Blessing."