

Sermon Script

Exodus 16:1-15

I know that I have shared this little story with you before but I am doing so again simply because it is one of my favourites.

Once upon a time there was a man who could not be pleased no matter what and finally his long-suffering wife decided that she had had enough; for one day at least, he wouldn't be able to find anything to complain about. That morning then she asked him, "And what would you like for breakfast dear?"

"Five slices of bacon and two slices of toast with marmalade", he replied. "I also want two eggs; one scrambled and the other one fried." His wife swiftly prepared the meal and put it down in front of him. She stood back and waited for the compliments; after all it was exactly what he had asked for! But what did he say? "Doggone it woman, you went and scrambled the wrong egg!"

We may smile at this if only because it captures a truth; that there are some people in life who can never seemingly be pleased no matter what. Indeed I wonder if God himself felt that way at the time of today's scripture passage.

The Hebrews were on their way to the Promised Land and so far it had been a tremendous experience. First of all there had been the Passover when the Angel of Death had passed over their blood-stained doorways but had struck down all the first-born males of Egypt. Overwhelmed by this disaster, the pharaoh had set the Hebrews free. After that came their tremendous experience by the shores of the Reed Sea. With the water in front of them and the pursuing Egyptian army behind them, it seemed as if there was no escape but then God sent the wind to drive the water back enabling the Hebrews to cross over to safety. Then when the Egyptians tried to follow them, the water had come crashing down and they had all perished. So far the exodus had proved to be a most uplifting experience but now? There was trouble. They were out in

the wilderness and their food supplies were running low. Not surprisingly perhaps, the people forgot all about the great things that God had already done for them and started to complain.

“If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death!”

Now this of course simply wasn’t true. They had not lived lives of ease and luxury in Egypt just sitting around eating as much as they wanted! They had been mistreated and oppressed slaves. Talk about a selective memory! How quickly they had forgotten about all of the wonderful things that God had done for them. Indeed who would have blamed God if he had just washed his hands of these ingrates altogether and found himself another chosen people? He didn’t though; instead he provided for them. In the evening quails covered the camp and in the morning the ground was covered with a heavy dew. When the dew evaporated, a white, flaky and rather gooey substance was left behind. And what was the people’s reaction to it?

They kept asking one another ‘manhu, manhu?’ which is Hebrew for ‘what is this stuff?’ Nobody wanted to touch it never mind taste it but finally one person, braver or perhaps hungrier than all of the rest did. Much to that person’s surprise, he or she realized that this strange stuff actually tasted pretty good! Day after day then, this mysterious substance was collected and even baked into loaves of bread. Over time in fact the question became a noun; ‘manhu’ became ‘manna’. There is an irony in all of this though. All the while when the people were complaining about being hungry and asking ‘manhu, manhu?’ the food was right there in front of them; it was the bread from heaven and the visible presence of God himself. But I have to wonder, are we ever like those people of long ago?

One of the great messages and promises of the Bible is that the One who created us, loves us and forgives us is also always with us. We can think of what God did for the Hebrews in today’s lesson and we can also think of the words of this psalm, which is one of my favourites:

“Where could I go to escape thy spirit?
Where could I flee from thy presence?
If I climb the heavens, thou art there!
There too if I lie in Sheol.”

We can also remember the last earthly words of Jesus himself as recorded in Matthew’s gospel. “And I will be with you always, to the end of time.”

The Bible tells us over and over again that as we journey through life and make our way to our own Promised Land, we are not alone. But how often do we, like those Hebrews in today’s scripture passage, wonder where on earth God is? Living in the trying times that we do with all of its uncertainty, how often do we ask the same question that they did? The truth however is that the signs of God, his love, presence and working in our lives are all around us. Indeed I wonder; how often are we like the subjects of the famous scientific experiment, “The Invisible Gorilla”?

This experiment was conducted by a researcher named Daniel Simon at the University of Illinois. In it, the participants were asked to watch a film clip of a group of people walking around in a circle while passing a basketball around; half of them were wearing white shirts and the others black ones. Those watching the clip were asked to count the number of times that those dressed in the white shirts touched the ball. Part way through the clip though, a man dressed in a gorilla suit joined those passing the ball around. He danced, pranced and jumped all around; there was seemingly no way that anyone could fail to notice him. In reality though, only fifty percent of those watching the clip noticed him. Before the start of the experiment ninety percent of those watching were confident that they would see what was going on right before their very eyes yet only fifty percent of them did. And then when they were told that they had missed the man prancing around in a gorilla suit, some of the experiment’s participants got very angry insisting that there had never been a gorilla present; why if there had been, then of course they would have seen him!

Now the point of this experiment is obvious. The participants in the experiment were so focused on counting the people in white shirts who

touched the ball that they quite literally did not see the man in the gorilla suit right up front and centre. Many of the participants only saw what they expected to see but this of course isn't just true of those in that science experiment, this can be true of all of us. If we are not looking for God or if we are too focused on other things, then we will never see him; we will be oblivious to him and all the signs of his presence, even when they are there right there in front of us. And this is one of the challenges laid out for us in today's scripture passage; to be more perceptive of the presence and the working of God in the world around us.

One of the growing trends in Christianity today is an interest in the spirituality of Celtic Christianity; the spirituality of the Christians in Scotland and Ireland who lived long ago. There are many reasons for this interest, one of which being the belief that they were much more aware of the presence of God in their lives than what we generally are today. We can get carried away with this but there is also some truth to it as well. With this in mind I would like to close this message by sharing the words of an old Gaelic prayer that was recited every morning.

"I awake this morning
in the presence of the holy angels of God.
May heaven open wide before me,
above me and around me,
that I may see the Christ of my love
and his sunlit company
in all the things of earth this day.

And so may we all, this day and every day.