

The story of the Exodus is such a powerful story! I wonder what pieces of it you carry with you?

- Moses crying out to the Pharaoh - let my people go!
- The plagues and the locusts.
- The hasty exit with unleavened bread.
- The parting of the Red Sea.
- Miriam dancing on the shore.
- The people Israel being led through the desert by the very presence of God - a pillar of smoke by day and fire by night.
- And a people learning to order their lives in the wilderness.
- Being given the commandments?
- Making a golden calf?

And the river of blood and dead fish.

Did you remember that part of the story? I did not.

So it is that when I first read this passage in which God tells Moses to take the staff with which he struck the Nile and make water come from the stone - I thought - oh wow. How poetic. (Now I was mistaken, so do not follow me too far down this path.) But what came to mind was: so Moses struck the Red Sea, and it parted, and the people walked through the water like a Baptism, and now he is striking a rock for living water.

Except that was wrong. Great winds parted the red sea. Moses did not strike the Red Sea. He struck the Nile. The Nile and the Red Sea are not the same thing. So why was the Nile mentioned here - why the reference to this striking of the Nile? Well, it turns out that when Moses struck the Nile with his staff, the river turned to blood and all the fish died.

This detail was like a root in the path, seemingly there for the sole purpose of tripping me. Of tripping us. A reminder that we have to hold awe and horror together as we read the scripture.

This small detail draws our attention to the staff, and what Moses is to do with it - which is to strike a rock so that the people might drink fresh water.

The idea that, even in the deserts of our lives we might be nourished by an unexpected source of water is certainly timely and comforting. Many of us feel that we are wandering in dry and dangerous deserts, far from shade and cropland and ever-flowing streams.

I wonder what marks the landscape of your desert?

But there is something more in this root that is sticking up from the path. In this thing that is tripping us up. Because it points back a couple of chapters and reminds us that this was the first plague. **The plague is remembered in the provision of living water.**

And as you flip back through, through the 8 plagues, and through the escape through the Red Sea, you find that the people Israel have already been complaining about water. And food. And that their needs have been tended at each occasion. The bitter water has been made sweet. Mana has come down from heaven. And yet, here they are asking “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

There should be a flag on the field here, but I’m not sure which foul to call. Being overwrought? Building straw man arguments? Just totally not acknowledging past provision? Lack of faith? Lack of respect? Giving in to fear or anxiety?

It’s not really as if any of these would be unreasonable. Because if anything, we learn from this Exodus narrative that wilderness can last generations. This was not like a week of backpacking in the Mojave. Or a long winter. Or a season of grief. It wasn’t even like a long economic depression or years of war.

These are generations in the desert.

People live and die in the desert. There were generations that never knew anything but desert. And Moses never made it out.

Maybe it got easier? Maybe this was still so early in their wandering and they were really struggling mentally with what it meant to be secure?

We have all seen this seemingly nonsensical desire to return to something that wasn't even good to begin with. I've heard it called the "Back to Egypt Committee." Those folks who will tear their garments and flail around: Why oh why are we doing this new thing? It was so much better before. (It wasn't. You were enslaved.)

Tear their garments, or display their power points, or organize their grievances in fervent whispers.

Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us with thirst? (Really?)

And did you catch what Moses names the rock which is springing forth living water? Meribah. Because that means "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Here, in the desert, is the Lord among us or not?

I found these questions to be poignant reminders of how easy it is to miss the holy in the midst of our despair, even when we have seen it with our own eyes. Even when we have eaten the manna and drunk the water.

So it is that the questions posed in the gospel reading reached out and grabbed me, too. "By what authority are you doing these things?" asked the chief priests and the elders.

This sounds an awful lot like "is the Lord among us or not?"

And, as he is wont to do, Jesus tells them a story. This story ends with this gem, "truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. Because John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds."

Even after you have seen it with your own eyes...

And so it is that, during this time when our deserts seem so big, and so dry, and so frightening, we remember that the story of God does not shy away from desert.

The promise found in our holy scriptures is not that we will not spend time in the desert. In fact, the promise of these stories is not even that we will ever make it out. Instead, the promise is that God provides sustenance and life, again and again, and that God's provision does not depend on our faith or our remembering - or our ability to see.

Should we find ourselves asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?" we can rest assured that we are not the first to ask this.

But. Let us not fail to be changed when we come face to face with righteousness.