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THE PARADOX OF FIERCE LANDSCAPES

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Exodus 17.1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb, that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

The besetting sin of humanity, says Peter Gomes, is creating God in our own image. We have taken to a whole new art form the craft of believing that what we want God to look like and to be is the way God really is. Gomes cites as an example events from the sports pages of athletes who attribute all skill and winning to God. But what happens when you don't win or when skill fades? Where is your God then? And what gives you the right to think that God will choose your team to win over your opponent? We often assume that what we think best is what God thinks best. But God does not like being tested and tempted and put to the proof, as we see demonstrated in this story in Exodus.

(Peter J. Gomes, "Tempting God: A Lenten Sermon," in Pulpit Digest March-April 1998.)

The Israelites have, under Moses' leadership, come out of bondage and oppression of the Egyptian Pharaoh, crossing the sea on dry land, as the story goes, now wandering in the wilderness and wondering where God is. "We trusted you, Moses; we trusted God at your behest," they grumbled. "But where is God now that we're dying of thirst and there is no water?"

They complained of their plight even though they had been freed from slavery, getting so carried away with their anger that they're ready to stone the man who led them to freedom. There was no standing to reason. And when water was eventually found, they complained that it wasn't nicely chilled bottled natural spring water in easy-to-carry containers with no-drip pop-up tops. They complained so bitterly as entitled snobs that Moses named the place where water was found with descriptors that meant quarreling and testing. "Is God among us or not?" was their cynical cry.

Sound familiar? This story is more than a story of God providing for people in need; it stands, more importantly, as a mirror reflecting the truth of our own impertinence in challenging God to satisfy our needs, and to satisfy them yesterday if at all possible. The gardener prays for rain for her vegetables; the family prays that it won't rain on their picnic. God can't satisfy both, which makes the prayers for such things seem petty and inane as praying for your team to win. We want to make God our own personal meteorologist; our team's biggest cheerleader; our country's personal god. And when we don't get what we think we need, we wonder if God is among us or not.

Gomes tells of speaking to a group of visiting dignitaries at Harvard about the changes in the religious world, especially of the vitality of the Christian religion in Africa, Latin America and part of the Middle East. One of them asked: why does it seem that religion is on the decline in the western world? "That's a great question," Gomes replied. "Where people suffer, they see God not as opposite to the problems, not as a mere solution waiting to be invoked; they see God as present in and with their problems, and they see suffering, real suffering, not just as suburban angst but as the place to discover the presence of God. As the scripture says, suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope; and hope does not disappoint us. Ultimately this is a story of hope; hope that in the midst of the dry wilderness there is a water fountain around the next corner.

I suspect that most of us, in reflecting back on life, would identify the times when we grew the most in faith and maturity was during the difficult periods, the times when we could do nothing but hope. Our backs were up against the wall, and what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. The fierce landscapes are the battle grounds of faith, where we are forced to grow up or give up. We became stronger during those times because, not wanting to give up, we invest in the hope that our Mount Horeb, gushing with water to quench our emotional thirst, is just in front of us waiting for us to climb. And just as the uphill climb makes our physical heart stronger so the wilderness adventure strengthens our spirits. Neither are easy but both are necessary for endurance.

Fierce landscapes, those places of dry wilderness, are the residence of both nightmares and dreams. For the Israelites it was a land of freedom that was also wilderness; it wasn't the land of milk and honey but was the interim landscape on their way to the Promised Land. And strangely, it was the same place where they're dying of thirst where the water of life is to be found. They just don't see it yet. And ironically, the means of getting the water—by the staff in Moses's hand—was there all along, and was the same staff that polluted the river Nile to force the Egyptians hand in freeing these slaves. But Moses forgot, as we often do, that what he needed was something he already had, and failed memory slips easily into blaming someone else which cascades into complaining and accusing and cynicism.

The skills and persistence needed for the wilderness of our own lives is often at our disposal; we just forget we have them. We forget that we made it up the last mountain and our hearts are stronger for the next climb. We forget that the wilderness is an important, if difficult, place that forces us to listen to the still, small voice of God rather than fill up the space with anger and complaining about being entitled to an easier life. Much of what we need to get through tough times is at our disposal in our natural ability to persevere, in the marvelous brain we've been given with which to think and reason, and in the company of family and friends who are with us on the journey. The water that the Israelites so desperately needed was right in front of them.

This story serves as a mirror of our own journey to show us how we also participate in the besetting sin of creating God in our own image. God is not at our disposal to cure our every ailment or accommodate our entitlement. Infinite God is not limited by our finite understanding of life. A god who bends to our every complaint and expectation isn't, by definition, God. A god who gives in to our every demand isn't.

When the governor of Massachusetts was running for reelection, his busy schedule required a non-stop whirlwind of activity, going from town to town, making speeches, shaking hands and kissing babies. On one especially busy day of campaigning, when he'd had no time for lunch, he ended up at a community barbeque which was a welcome oasis amid his peckish wilderness. When he went through the line, he asked the lady serving the chicken if he could have two pieces of chicken. The woman responded, "No, I can't give you two pieces. My instructions are to give everybody just one piece." With his stomach growling, and his threshold for complaining lowered, he decided to throw his weight around a bit, and said "Ma'am, do you know who I am? I am the governor of this state." The woman just stared at him for a moment, then said, "Sir, do you know who I am? I'm the lady in charge of the chicken." (Bible.org "Bits & Pieces," May 28, 1992, Page 5-6)

How we do like to throw our weight around with God, expecting that God will do what we want because we are in need, we are hungry, we are thirsty, we are in pain, we are afraid, we are entitled and our spiritual stomachs are growling. God is the God of the chicken and everything else, and our prayer should not be one of complaint but one that gives thanks for the wing on our plate and the hope of living another day for having staved our hunger. We may not get that second piece of chicken we want, or that rain, or that win at the game, or even the water we need. There are no guarantees; life is often the wilderness. But wherever we are, whatever our circumstance, whatever our suffering, whatever our lot, God is in it with us and in that is our hope, which is more helpful than a solution if you stop to think about it.

For Israel in this story, and for us in our own story, The Promised Land is often a long way off, we know not where, and we know not how we'll get there. But living in hope brings the Promised Land into the wilderness. It's like driving at night, when our headlights illumine only a few feet in front of us. But we can drive all through the night that way. And who can complain about that?

--Gary L. McCann