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At The Corner of Test and Quarrel

Exodus 17:1-11

Romans 5:1-11

So, on Friday when I went to the grocery store with my normal shopping list, it was clear that the zombie apocalypse was pending. There was no toilet paper left on the shelves, and no rice or pimento cheese either. Go figure. It is scary. Every day has brought another closing or cancellation, and since as of last night there were no confirmed or presumptive cases of coronavirus in Richland County, we decided to hold worship today. My assumption is that if the pundits and prognosticators are right, we might not be allowed to hold worship next Sunday. And, I trusted that those who need and want to stay home, will have done that without any guilt or worry, and that those who wanted to worship would come. So, on behalf of the world that is frightened and worried, we gather to worship the one true God to whom the future belongs.

We do not know what is coming, and we acknowledge today that we know real need and fear. OK, I'm not sure what pimento cheese has to do with fear, but something I'm sure since it was all gone.

I found it interesting that this passage from Exodus was assigned for today. Because, in this story, the children of Israel have reason to be afraid and angry. They are out in the desert with no water. This is – at some point – a life or death matter. Yes, the Lord had led them out of slavery in Egypt. Yes, the Lord had allowed them to cross over the Red Sea on dry land and then drowned the Egyptian Army who had come to return them to slavery. Yes, they had bellies full of that strange, sweet bread that they named Manna – literally “what is it?” But now they needed water. And the need for water is real.

The people's response to this need is also very recognizable. “Moses!” they yell, “why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us, our children and our animals with thirst!?” People in need are prone to meanness and prone to assign nefarious motives if it suits their purpose. We live in an age when the distrust of leadership is at an all-time high, at least in my lifetime. But this Scripture reminds us that the fear, anger and tendency to fight unfairly is a characteristic of human beings from the beginning of recorded history. Moses names the place in the desert where this confrontation takes place Massah and Meribah, or Testing and Quarrel, because that is the people's response to need, fear, anxiety and anger.

We may not be able to point to Massah and Meribah today on a map of the Sinai desert, but we are very well familiar with the location. When we are afraid, in need, suffering or in grief, we almost always locate ourselves on the corner of Testing and Quarrel. “Is the Lord really with us or not?!” We say.

As I reflected on our current situation in light of this story, I first feel compelled to shine light on the false assumption or unexamined belief that is present both in our lives and in this story in Exodus. Many of us have a false and unexamined belief that faith in God, or right living, will somehow safeguard us from evil, suffering or illness. There lurks in all of us a draft of a contract that continually try to get God to sign that says, “If I will do X, then you/God will do Y.” But that is not a contract that I have ever seen God’s signature on. IN fact, that sort of transactional contract with a god is exactly what is at stake in immature, polytheistic and pagan religions in all times and places. As followers of Jesus, we know that loving God, serving God, and doing what is right, does NOT guarantee that we will be safe from the coronavirus, from cancer, from divorce, from mental illness, from death or any other form of suffering.

Rather, Scripture is much more familiar with the idea that being faithful, loving God and doing what God says is right more often than not leads to suffering. See the cross of Christ as exhibit A. When confronted with the suffering, grief and evil of human history, God does a curious thing. God comes to earth to suffer with us. God enters our own suffering far more than God relieves our suffering.

Now, we know a lot about the reality of suffering. It is our children who have cancer. It is we who are having to suffer cancer treatments or live with a parkinson’s diagnosis. It is we whose children are lost to us because of addiction, mental illness, suicide, greed, hatred or resentment. It is our spouses who have chosen lies, pornography or another person to the hard work of relationship and marriage. It is the company we gave years of service to that has lied to us and broken promises that now leave us uncertain about our own future and ability to support our families. We know suffering. We know suffering much more intimately than we wish we knew suffering. We are Israel, and we are thirsty!!! Where is God? Is God really among us? We are often to be found on the corner of Testing and Quarrel!

And, it needs to be said that suffering can crush a person. Suffering often leads to anger and a desire to stone the first available leader. That is what Moses says! These people are about to stone me! God! Intervene! Watch for that to happen in the next weeks and months all over the world. And, suffering often leads to resentment. Why me?! Suffering can lead to hopelessness and to a loss of faith. And, if your suffering leads you to any of these places, the first thing I want to say to you is, welcome. Welcome to the human race. At some point all of us have found ourselves on this corner.

And that leads to the second thing that I think is important to say today. While all of us find ourselves from time to time on the corner of Testing and Quarrel, that does not have to be our final destination. When we find ourselves drowning in anger, resentment, fear, hopelessness or a loss of faith and hope, then it is honest and accurate to acknowledge that is where we are.

And, I hope that you will take some comfort in knowing that the people of God have often found ourselves right here together on the corner of Testing and Quarrel. AND ALSO, we acknowledge that our faith offers us the possibility that the corner of Testing and Quarrel is not our only option. God offers another option to those who seek it.

When we find ourselves hard pressed. When we find ourselves afraid of the future. When we find ourselves unable to breathe because of grief, loss or hopelessness, then we can turn to the hard won belief of the Apostle' Paul and his words of encouragement in Romans 5. This equation that Paul offers us is not a hallmark card formula for success as much as I believe it is a description of the hard won endurance of a faith that believes more in God than in the crushing weight of suffering and evil. I think Paul here is speaking from his own experience.

The Christian faith offers no false assurances in the face of suffering, but it does offer an alternative narrative. Suffering can produce endurance. Endurance can produce character. And Character can produce hope. And hope is a worthy goal because Christian hope is based on God's love and God's ability to redeem, reconcile and save. Any my experience is that the path to compassion, hope, love and peace almost always leads through suffering and fear.

Before Kitty Goding died of cancer this last year – after a long and hard-fought fight – she told me and her children that while she would not have chosen to have cancer and cancer is an evil, that it had also been a teacher to her. She said that because of that suffering, she had learned so much about what is real and true and good. And she had learned the sweetness of love and the power of trust and reliance on God and family and friends because of the suffering she endured.

What if in the next weeks, or whatever this virus progression turns out to be, what if the people of God decided – in the face of risk – to act out of faith and hope instead of acting out of fear and anger? What if we decided to check on our neighbors and if we offered to go to the store for our elderly and ill friends? What would it be like to pray for the hourly workers at the grocery and drug stores facing panicked shoppers? What if we think of ways to support the first responders and health care workers who will be on the front lines in these next weeks and months in addition to thinking of ourselves. We are not guaranteed safety, health, wealth or water. But none of that is going to last forever anyway. Instead of giving the last word to anxiety, fear, anger, resentment, grief, pain, cancer, addiction, infidelity, or suffering, what if we ask God to pour Love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit?

In God's eyes we are precious. We are loved. We are known. Our sufferings are not only known to God, but shared by God. Suffering – when given to God – may be turned into something far more lasting and life-giving. We have seen that truth lived out in the person of Jesus Christ. His empty cross is our assurance.

Let us pray.

Lord God, Almighty and Holy, we are afraid and worried about much that we cannot control. And we are staggering under the weight of need and pain and suffering. Even as we do our best to endure what we cannot control, pour your love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Take us by the hand and lead us from suffering to endurance, from endurance to character and from character to hope so that we may act out of love and in faith. Be present with those who, even now, are on the front lines of this illness. For grocery clerks, doctors, nurses, first responders, hospital and nursing facility staff we pray for protection from illness. And where there is illness, we pray for healing. And where there is not healing, we pray for your Grace. May we not only know your love, feel your love and receive your love, may we also act out of your love. O Lord, hear our prayers and answer us. Amen.