

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
October 1, 2017 Pentecost 18/Proper 21/Year A
Texts – Exodus 17: 1-7; Psalm 78: 1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2: 1-13; Matthew 21: 23-32

Anxiety and fear are powerful forces in our lives. They are like demons that take over our hearts and minds, possessing our better selves.

People of faith are no strangers to anxiety and fear. Think of Peter who, at one point, boasted he would never leave Jesus, never shrink back. Yet when the authorities came to arrest Jesus and made clear that they had had enough by torturing him and condemning him to die, Peter turned away, distanced himself from Jesus, and found comfort with the guards warming themselves by a charcoal fire. Life always feels better by the warmth of a fire. Think of the zealous Pharisee, Saul, who absorbed the fear of the religious authorities and reacted to the burgeoning Jewish/Christian movement by inflicting violence against them. It's a common reaction to the people we fear: just try to stomp them out, wipe them out of existence, remove the perceived source of anxiety. Think of Jesus in Gethsemane, asking God to take away, if possible, the fate he was about to endure. Faith in God is no guarantee that we will not feel anxiety and fear.

Our Hebrew ancestors, newly liberated from slavery in Egypt, now find themselves wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. They're increasingly uncomfortable, anxious, and fearful. Their leader is the reluctant, tongue-tied Moses, who wanted only a quiet life tending sheep, but now finds himself burdened by the griping and misery of the people God has just liberated. First they complain about lack of food, and tell Moses he was a fool to bring them out of Egypt. At least there "we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread," they say. Their fear and anxiety is reaching an all-time high, and Moses' approval rating is in the tank! Moses responds in effect by saying, "look, don't blame me; this was all God's idea. I'm not thrilled with this either." But he also boldly steps up, and brings the people's complaint to God. And God responds by raining down manna from heaven.

Then the people complain about lack of water, as we heard today. We can read their anxiety in the eyes of the people of Puerto Rico today, who also struggle for water, food, and medicine in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Again the people lay their anxiety at Moses' feet because they understandably fear for their lives. Why are we here wandering around in no man's land? We were ok back in Egypt. It wasn't great, but at least we knew our place, and we knew what to expect. Moses begins to fear for his own life and cries out to God, "What am I to do with these people? They're ready to stone me to death." So God again responds, this time by giving them water to drink.

Most of us are not much different from the ancient Hebrews. We understandably yearn for stability, for the familiar, and for the meeting of our basic human needs. We need to know what to expect. We don't want to have to think about where our next meal is coming from or where we will sleep or whether an unseen enemy will attack us. Stability is a good thing, a very good thing. And it's a reasonable expectation. There are many in our society, including many in our surrounding communities who live daily with the fear and anxiety of not knowing where their next meal will come from, whether this might be the month CMP turns off their power, or whether they'll find an eviction notice on their door when they get home from work. They know on a daily basis what instability feels like.

In a different way, all of us probably feel some instability in our lives right now. The world is trudging through a kind of wilderness. The barbarism of terrorists, an aggressive Russia, various civil

wars and ongoing border disputes, divisive politics, rising nuclear rhetoric, the sense, as Yeats wrote, that the center cannot hold. It's all come together to raise the world's fear and anxiety level. I feel it. What's going to happen? Will we be attacked? Will I be able to put gas in my car? Is our food safe? Will the rising ocean destroy our coastal communities? What's around the bend? We don't really know. And we don't like losing confidence in the future – not one bit. Perhaps we even have the courage to put God to the test: "Is the Lord among us or not?"

That question in ancient times and now reveals a strikingly juvenile relationship with God. Behind the question is the image of a God who is the great parent-provider with whom we are happy when things are stable. But when things in our world and in our lives go awry, then God's credibility, perhaps even existence, is called into question. Is the Lord among us or not? When we get what we need, the answer is yes. We say we are blessed. When we don't get what we need and our world is turned upside down, our answer might be no. We say we are cursed. There no doubt is a fairly common theology out there that leads people to expect God to fill up our barns, to bring stability, to not upset the status quo.

The last several weeks we have been reading some highlights from the story of the Exodus. If the story of the Exodus tells us anything, it is that salvation is a journey that sometimes destroys the status quo. Salvation upsets the stability we crave. It throws us into the wilderness. It gives us good reason to be anxious, fearful, and angry. It may even cause us to lash out against the God who is falling down on the job of being the great parent provider we want him to be.

Yet the story of the Exodus does not end in the wilderness. It continues through the wilderness. Indeed, it's almost as if God intentionally brings the people to the Promised Land through a round-about, circuitous route precisely so that over time, in fact, over several generations, they have the opportunity to learn to let go of their nostalgic memories of the flesh-pots and the herbs and spices they knew in Egypt. They need to learn that what they thought was secure, really is not. They need to experience a different God, the God who is with them even without all the fragile props, the God who is with them even in the wilderness. One of the marks of maturity in faith – both in individuals and communities – is the ability to walk through the wilderness without the tangible props that make it easy to say "Isn't God wonderful? Aren't we blessed?" and still trust in God, who is unseen, unheard, unfelt. Is the Lord among us, or not?

The desert fathers and mothers of ancient times embraced that question as the driving force of their faith. It replaced anything else on which they might have previously tried to build their relationship with God. They intentionally let go of the props that held up their fragile tents of security back in the cities, and moved out into the desert with absolutely nothing. In the wilderness they sought to be pruned by God. Stripped of all their supports, they learned to live constantly in the tension of the question, "Is God with us or not?"

Once again that question has reared up as the question of our times. Feeling the whirl of chaos, we are forced to confront our ultimate insecurities. We are forced to ask the question, is God with us or not? We will never know until we let go and enter the wilderness.