“Moses and Authentic Prayer”

A Sermon by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Bedford, MA

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Scripture References: Numbers 11; James 5:13-20

I want to focus on our Old Testament passage this morning. I was initially drawn to it because it made me laugh. As a parent, it reads like a typical few months in the life of a family. I could hear Moses, exhausted from feeding, housing, and motivating his flock, muttering “seriously?” under his breath as the Israelites pounded him with complaint after complaint. But as I spent time with it, it also came to speak loudly to me as a spiritual person always seeking a deeper relationship with God. So, let’s review where we find poor Moses this morning.

Moses, with God’s help, has freed the Israelites from their enslavement under Pharoah and gotten them safely into the desert. Yes…let’s not lose sight of that. Moses, has succeeded in liberating the Israelites from slavery. As you will recall, he got them safely into the desert by holding out his arm and parting the Red Sea—not an everyday occurrence, even for the chosen people of God. In the desert they run out of food and water, and again, Moses, with God’s help, comes through in truly miraculous ways—he whacks the stick on the rock and water flows out, and then food—manna—begins to literally fall from the sky every single day, enough for all to be filled.

In our passage this morning, therefore, we find them safe, nourished and well-hydrated. And yet…and yet...there is a group of “rabble” among them who are complaining. These folks are, indeed, full, but are now bored with having to have the same food every day. So, bored, that they are actually longing for their time of enslavement! “We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic: but now there is nothing at all but all this manna to look at.”

(Incidentally, I ate a bologna and cheese sandwich every single day from 1st through 6th grades, at my own request…I think I knew even then that you foodies out there were trouble!)

As for most leaders who encounter the rabble crew, Moses begins to question whether leadership is worth all this hassle. And what does Moses do, he goes right to God. He prays! I know, it doesn’t seem like prayer…at least the way the church for centuries encouraged us to pray. It isn’t humble…it isn’t gracious or polite…it doesn’t acknowledge with thanks all that God has done for Moses up to this point. But it *is* prayer.

Moses doesn’t have a history of prescribed words to draw from as he approaches God…there was no Jewish liturgy back then, and even if there had been, he wasn’t raised in his Hebrew family of origin, but instead by Pharoah.

So, Moses comes to God without any teaching about who God is and how he’s *supposed* to approach God…and instead, comes to God raw…he comes to God angry and frustrated…smart-mouthed even! “Did *I* conceive all this people?” he asks, “Did *I* give birth to them?” Moses speaks to God completely authentically *and, because of his personal history with God,* expecting that something can change as he does so. This definition of prayer is a very Old Testament framework for prayer—in these early days of the Israelites, prayer is nothing other than interacting with God, *and* expecting that something can change as a result. Not necessarily *will* change, but *can* change.

To me, the invitation in hearing Numbers today is to step out of all our pre-conceived notions of what prayer is and should be, and reclaim the Old Testament understanding of prayer… truthfully interacting with God and, based on our history with God, expecting something can change as a result.

That change we expect could be in our own emotional landscape—we may expect our prayer can diffuse, at least momentarily, our anxiety or grief—or the change we expect could be more bold, expecting that our prayer can result in a change in the people and events around us.

I’m curious, do *you* expect something can change as a result of your prayer? I mean it…do you really expect that your prayers can change something or someone, even if that someone is you?

If not at all, or not *every* *time you pray*, then Moses’ story encourages you, encourages us as a community of faith, to examine our own life of prayer. We might need to change how we pray, or change what we consider to be prayer in the first place.

If prayer is anything we do where we both interact with God and expect something can change, then it might not be pious, polite requests that we should pray…instead, maybe we should pray raw, frustrated pleas for help, or for restraint, or for peace, fully expecting that we can feel some measure better, or stronger, or clearer once we’re done arguing with God. Or, maybe we should pray bold thanksgivings, raised loudly and with joy at moments we want to make sure we are keenly present to, fully expecting that the praise can refill our depleted selves.

This sort of prayer may not come easily to us—it may require us to be more vulnerable or visible than we are used to…this sort of raw, unpious prayer is not the only way to pray in the Old Testament way, though. Again, returning to our framework of prayer, if it is anything we do where we both interact with God and expect something can change, then there are likely myriad times we are at prayer and just never named it as such.

Maybe we have been praying with our hands or our feet—making music or art, hiking or walking, knowing that interacting with beauty is interacting with God, and fully expecting that adding beauty to the world or receiving beauty from it can change us and all those who happen upon us while we do it.

Or maybe we’ve been praying with our attention, getting lost in a fulfilling project at work, knowing that moments of time-lapsing “flow” are divine interactions that will ultimately give rise to a new idea or a creative thread that can change our work ahead, and our experience of work, itself.

Or maybe we’ve been praying with letters and emails, with megaphones and marching feet, knowing that when we name injustice we are walking alongside Jesus, and fully expecting that our communities, and ultimately our world, can change when we do that.

It may seem pedantic, but it really is important to understand our own lives of prayer. We need to be able to name how and when we pray. If we walk around thinking that we don’t pray, or mistaking what our moments of actual, authentic prayer are, then we miss many, many of our interactions with God and the changes that they bring about—and in missing those, we miss the unfolding of our personal and collective love stories with God. Failing to noticing our story--our relationship--with God will keep us from experiencing the deepening spiritual capacity and union with God that we have been created to long for.

In our second reading this morning, James reminded his community of faith, and ours, that “*The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”* So, let us throw up our hands and cry out in exasperation to God, or laugh with God, or join God in our experiences of creativity, or beauty, or rapt attention, or risky, active love for others, expecting *every time* that in so doing, things *can* change. AMEN.