

***God is Great***  
***Exodus 17:1-7***  
***27 September 2020***  
***Sermon by Rev. Jessica McCrae***

I like to walk. Whenever I need to clear my head a bit, or just take a bit of time for me, I go for a walk. Every lunch hour I like to take a walk here in the Village, and when I'm at home one of my favourite places to walk is through the Rattray Marsh, just down the road from where I live. It is beautiful there, and when you are very lucky you can see coyotes, deer, foxes, snakes, owls and eagles. But the marsh was hit very hard with the emerald ash borer, too. And so another thing that you will see are dead trees, or damaged trees, from where the ash trees have fallen. It was a real blow to the marsh and quite sad for those of us who love it. But the changes in the marsh have awakened me to notice new things, to notice life among the seemingly lifeless bits.

For example, when I was walking there last week, I noticed this gorgeous splash of white against the green trees around it and the brilliant blue sky. (You can see it up here on the screen). It was a birch tree that had been broken off, perhaps in a storm, perhaps when another tree hit it. I was struck by how sad it was that this tree was taken out, without any

leaves left to nourish it, just the tall broken remnant of what it once was. It seemed so dead, while everything around it flourished. But as I stood there grieving what it once was, I noticed what it is ... a home for many, a place of shelter, a repository for insects that nourish the woodpeckers, a tall lookout for the cooper's hawk that landed on top of it. All along the length of this beautiful dead tree were deep holes, providing shelter for some and access to food for others. There was life in that seemingly dead tree. Lots of it. And I marvelled at what God provides in the wilderness.

This morning we join the Israelites again in the desert, and once again, they are showing their fullest humanity, frustrated, scared and grumbling. So much grumbling! But it is no wonder. Moses has led them to set up camp in a new area and it seems there isn't a drop of water to be found. They are thirsty. And they are frustrated. And as they do, the Israelites began to grumble, not even just grumble ... we are told they quarrelled with Moses. Which leads us to believe voices were raised, threats were uttered and we know, God was tested.

This story is very much a parable of God's grace and patience as once again, despite all that the people have been given along the way, despite all of the times God has proven God's love and commitment to them, they just can't seem to muster trust. They can't seem to believe that

God will see them through the challenging situations they find themselves in. They can't seem to hold on to faith.

Faith is hard. And when we find ourselves in a tough place, in a situation where we can imagine a way out, or a place that seems lifeless and we can't see how we can find what we need to flourish, it is easy to get anxious, to quarrel with God, it is easy to doubt. For the Israelites it was their need for water and their inability to see how God could provide in such a lifeless place. Maybe for us it is struggling to imagine healing or health after a difficult diagnosis. Maybe it is the panic that comes with economic insecurity or job loss. Maybe it is sadness that comes from knowing that while we are worshipping together today, not everyone can be present with us in the building. Maybe it is moments of doubt and anxiety in the wee hours of the morning, when you wonder what will happen next, how will church ever feel normal again, how will we get our lives and our society back to something we recognize, in the midst of Covid. Like the Israelites we know what it is like to be in a tough spot, whether personally or collectively. We have experienced the barrenness of our own metaphorical deserts, we know what it is to wonder how God will ever be able to bring us out of where we are, to where we should be. We know what it is like to

desperately want life to come out of the dead things, but lacking the faith, or the vision, to believe it can happen.

You see, while today's story is a parable about God's grace and patience, a parable about how God relates to us and accepts us in our full humanity, doubts and all, it is also a story that reminds us that our God is a great and awesome God, who can bring life out of ... nothing. It is a reminder not only about how God relates to us, but it is a reminder that God is willing and able to provide what we need bringing water from a rock, and life from the desert. No situation is so bleak that God can not bring new life into it.

Hear that again. No situation is so bleak that God can not bring new life into it.

Now God could have just sent rain to the Israelites in the desert, they could have collected the rain and had the water they needed at camp. But as we know that isn't what happened. Instead, God instructed Moses to strike the rock at Horeb, and brought water out of the rock. It was a little more complicated and convoluted than a simple rainstorm, but it is a profound image that helps us to begin to understand a little, the depth of God's power and God's love for God's children. Water from a rock! It seems like an impossibility. When the Israelites looked around them and

saw sand and rocks they did not see life there, they did not see hope or possibility there. They only saw death there. But when God saw their situation, God saw only possibility.

God saw only possibility.

Remember, no situation is so bleak that God can not bring new life into it.

Remember, our God can bring water from a rock.

A dead tree can become a refuge of life, a home for birds and insects, a repository of rain water, a place of food for woodpeckers and a perch for eagles to study the possibilities around them.

No situation is so bleak that God can not bring new life into it.

Now the Israelites would still have some bad days ahead, and their grumbling and obstinance would resurface again. But our God is great, and patient and generous, and God would continue to be with them in the desert and they learned and as they grew in faith to become the people God called them to be. And in that desert, their thirst was quenched.

As we journey through our own deserts, when we find ourselves forced to make camp in the lifeless and barren places I pray that your thirst will be quenched. I pray that you will look around at the place you find yourself today, whether it be a personal struggle or enmeshed in the

collective stress of this year, and that you will catch glimmers of the new life God envisions for your life, for our lives, and that you will trust that God is working here, now, to answer the prayers, respond to the quarreling, and reveal new things that you can not even imagine yet.

As I draw this sermon to a close I would like to leave you with a song that a friend shared with me last weekend, as some churches were beginning to open up for in person worship. On social media people were getting frustrated that nothing yet felt normal, things weren't as they wanted them to be. There was a lot of anxiety and sadness and quarrelling with God going on. And a friend sent me this video by 3 siblings out in Nova Scotia, The Gilberts, along with the message "Courage for the journey. Live in hope!" It is a song about being surprised by the blooming of a cherry tree after the chill of winter's snows. A good reminder in these challenging times, as covid numbers climb and our days get shorter and winter approaches, that new days, new life, will come. Let's take a listen.