

Water is Life
Exodus 15:22-27

It is early spring in Austin. Already there are indications it will be a hot and dry summer. The ground is dry and daily we, like most people in the Western States, turn our eyes toward the heavens. We look for rain – the blessings of cool and refreshing water – in abundance.

I probably didn't need the reminder about the importance of water, but recently it came. The young people at the local church where I attend went on a walk to raise funds for drilling deep water wells in developing countries. I saw the pictures. There were hundreds of children and whole families engaged in the walk. Through the proceeds they are enabling two villages in different countries to receive life-giving water – free of pollutants and diseases. For those of us who live in Texas water is precious. But water that brings healing; that is truly grace.

Exodus 15:22-27

In our text for today the descendants of Jacob/Israel were finally on the move. The time of slavery had ended. The problematic negotiations between Pharaoh and Moses had run their course. Yahweh had decisively defeated the Egyptians in the plague contests and at the Sea of Reeds. Moses and Miriam had sung their songs of victory.

Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power
Thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.

All that is over. They start out for Sinai and finally to the land; they are on the move.

But the way is through the wilderness. They go three days in the hot, dry, barren territory somewhere in the desert. Water is nowhere to be found. For my generation an early scene in the movie Lawrence of Arabia comes to mind. Lawrence is at a well. Gradually a figure on a camel comes into view from across the desert. Trouble is in the wind. Whose water will it really be? But for those children of Jacob is there a well? Where is the water? Has Yahweh given them a pyric victory over the Egyptians? They are on the way to the promised land. But will they perish before they arrive? Is this all a cruel trick? A cosmic joke!

Then they come to Morah. Water at last. But verse 23 brings us the sad word. The etymology of the word Morah signifies that it means "bitter." Four times in this verse (counting the name of the place) it is described as "bitter." Speaking of movies this is not Lawrence of Arabia anymore but it sounds more like an old Clint Eastwood low-budget western! At any rate there is trouble. Here the famous 'murmuring' of the people gets underway. Moses, as Servant of the Lord has to act. The Lord leads him to find a piece of wood. Moses throws it into the water. The water becomes sweet. Shortly thereafter, they come to Elim (verse 27). Here they find a wonderful oasis. Seemingly they survive: at least for a while.

"I Am the Lord: The Healer"

This kind of experience is repeated in other places in the biblical story. As with Daniel and his companions the people of God do undergo severe ordeals in the course of moving to the fulfillment of divine promises; but God has not abandoned those who are his own. It is a good word. But I believe there is something more!

It is typical of the Bible that when we look a second time at the text an additional word captures our attention. This word comes in Exodus 15:25b-26. After the bitter water at Morah turns sweet we are told that on the spot the Lord made a statute and ordinance. This is odd. We are still several chapters away from Sinai. Couldn't the Lord wait and then add one more statute to his list? Why now? It does not seem to fit the flow of the narrative. It is puzzling.

Some suggest that we need to look at this text from a later perspective. Centuries passed before God's Torah or teaching was finally assembled. By then it had begun to take on an eternal quality. Who cares when it was given? What is important is that it abides in the body of Torah. Maybe.

What then was the ordinance? Well, it comes in the form of a promise connected with a test. First of all the promise. "I am the Lord: the Healer." Think about that. Sinai is before them. There they will receive a whole body of teaching designed to preserve the community from disorientation, internal decay, sickness and death. The Lord promises to heal them. Perhaps this is even why his statute with its promise is given before they come to the Mount. They have time to think about it. Abiding in Torah will keep God's people from the realm of death.

Israel remembers well the situation with Pharaoh and his minions in Egypt. Three times in Exodus 7:18, 21 and 24 we are told that water, the source of life, becomes undrinkable when the ruler's heart became hardened. Will the Israelites' encounter with God's word at Sinai recapitulate a similar process? It is noteworthy that right at the end of the Book of the Covenant in Exodus 23:25-26 we find these words:

You shall serve the Lord your God, and I will bless your bread and your water;
and I will take sickness away from the midst of you. None shall cast her young or
be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.

Yes, along with the promise comes the test. Will their community submit to God's healing through faithfulness to Torah?

Conclusion

Now some of you may be thinking, "Is this promise simply a metaphor for a healthy community existence – peace and prosperity in the land?" To be sure, that in itself is a massive promise. But what about me, the individual believer? Where do I stand in all of this. After all I am acquainted with sickness too! And it is physical! Can we get this down on the ground! In one of his books Gerhard Lohfink narrates a quip from Woody Allen about Christians who claim the Messiah has come and started a new creation. Allen the quint-essential cynical New Yorker states:

There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is, how far is it from midtown and how late is it open.

Cynical indeed. But is our faith real? I believe the Torah held out the promise that God would sustain his people through the difficult times – even exile in a foreign land. Jesus has promised to be with his people to the end. He will not abandon us! The new creation has begun. The grace of healing is here. It will not only take place but sickness itself will be no more at the last day. He is the One who proclaimed:

If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me as the scriptures has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'

Now this he said about the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive (John 7:39).

There is nothing more real than bread and water. God's word that he is Healer is just as sure.

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