

Sermon, September 24, 2023, St. David's Episcopal, Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16
(Elizabeth Felicetti)

Last Sunday we heard two readings from the book Exodus about a defining moment in biblical history: the awe-inspiring miracle of the parting of the Red Sea, which allowed the enslaved Israelites to finally flee their Egyptian captors so that now they were free after generations of oppression.

Sometimes in our Sunday readings we skip whole chapters of the Bible, but from last Sunday to this we only skipped over a few verses, and yet everything is different. The giant event is behind the Israelites, and they are adjusting to their new normal of wandering in the wilderness. They don't know it, but this will be what their life is like for the next forty years.

Already everything has changed. Last week, we heard about tambourines and dancing. This week, we hear about grumbling. The translation we use reads that the Israelites complained, but other translations use "grumble," which I like because the word grumble is also used in our Gospel this week. But my favorite translation is "murmur." Both grumble and murmur are more evocative to me about those sounds of discontent people make as a group.

Because even in their unhappiness they had become a group, a community, a congregation. They used to be disparate slaves who had come together to escape, then were trapped at the brink of the sea before being miraculously rescued by a violent act of God that killed the relentless army pursuing them. Not long afterwards reality set in. They were hungry. While they used to cry out to God for freedom, now they were remembering the bread they ate back in Egypt. Hungry, the new community murmured against Moses and Aaron.

God heard them again, just as God heard their cries back when they were enslaved and oppressed, and God offered bread—manna—in the morning and quails in the evening. One commentator¹ points out that this food was not miraculous in the way that the parting of the Red Sea was miraculous, but rather ordinary food for that time and that place.

Sometimes we see God only in wild, extraordinary experiences and fail to recognize the holy in our day-to-day lives, or to continue to recognize the holy after we have received what we most wanted.

Have you ever gotten your heart's desire? Maybe a romantic interest or a job or a certain place to live. Have you longed for something, and then it happened? If so, what happened next? Were you eternally thankful to God and lived with gratitude and utter happiness forever?

Or did murmuring creep in? Did you start desiring some next thing?

I wanted this job—the rector of St. David's—so badly thirteen years ago. I felt sincerely called and was terrified that I might be wrong and that the search committee would invite someone else. When Rob Field called me and told me that the search committee had selected me, I was ecstatic. Then everything was overwhelming: saying good-bye to the church where I had been serving,

¹ Fretheim, Terence. *Exodus*. Louisville: John Knox, 1991, 181-183

getting ready to move, Gary retiring, moving here and adjusting. I still love being the rector. This church has been my passion. I still sometimes pinch myself.

But I also complain. And so do all of you. Sometimes in the complaining, I fail to see God's hands at work in the everyday business of a church.

My experiences with cancer have helped me to be more grateful for the ordinary blessings of life, but there always seems to be one more scan, one new bad thing. Sometimes the miracles and the murmurs are right next to each other: I had an article in *The Atlantic* two years ago, for example, something I never even dreamed could happen, but the very next day learned that I had new nodules in my lung. Or I published my first book, a lifelong dream, and came back to work after so much time away, and now learned that my thyroid looks suspicious so I need more surgery.

These are all personal things, so not really appropriate to compare to the Parting of the Red Sea and their subsequent murmurs, but part of my call here as your pastor is to help us all see ourselves in these ancient stories, as well as to see God working in our lives and in our church. I remember when I first came here the parish hall was still fairly new, and I heard over and over again about The Miracle of the Building. St. David's was the so-called "Little Church That Could," and even when various things became too expensive, people came together and painted it themselves. Most of us today missed that whole miracle of the building and need to continue to find miracles in using that parish hall for the work of the church and to serve the community. Do you see the everyday blessings?

Do you see the blessings in the blossoms outside, or in our prayer-soaked labyrinth, in our new Little Free Library, in each other? In the way Jay and Courtney and Vaden minister to our children during worship? In the way Dana and Tammy and Kathy form kids into disciples? In the way Cathy mows the grass?

We need to be able to tie all of this ordinariness into the extraordinariness of Christ's love for all of us. We can see whatever we do in the church as ministry when we remember the major miracles like the parting of the Red Sea or the Resurrection of Jesus after his brutal and unjust crucifixion. Can you see how cleaning up after coffee hour or turning off the lights on Sundays or counting the coins in the collection plate connect to the work of God?

God heard the Israelites in their hour of greatest need and led them through the Red Sea, and God heard them again days later when the shine wore off and they were grumbling about food. God is with us in our darkest times but also in our ordinary times. How will you find God today, and how will you help others discern how God might be working in their lives? Are you open to God using you for minor miracles and ordinary blessings?