

MARCH 19TH, 2017: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 17:3-7 Romans 5:1-2, 5-8 John 4:5-42

We know we're dealing with the Yahwistic source of the Torah when during those passages describing the Chosen People's Exodus and wilderness wanderings the author goes into detail about the Israelites' griping, grumbling and complaining. Today's Exodus pericope provides a classic example: ". . . The people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst . . . ?'" Scholars believe this 10th century BCE author had a good reason for zeroing on that embarrassing aspect of her ancestors' personality.

Our sacred authors always write for specific groups of people. They never compose their works for "everyone;" certainly not for us. The faces of the communities for whom they write are always before their eyes. Their unique problems prompt them to write. If there were no problems in our ancient faith communities, we'd have no Scripture.

It's easy to conclude there must have been lots of griping, grumbling and complaining in the Yahwist's community, else we wouldn't have today's first reading. Thankfully the author actually tells us what the whining was about – a simple question. "Is Yahweh in our midst or not?"

Like all faith communities, the Yahwist's fell into the trap of creating a "sacred history:" a time like no other, when God worked in special ways for special people, a time which made their own day and age pale in comparison. If only they could have taken part in the Exodus when Yahweh worked those famous signs and wonders, or even participated in the 40-year trek through the wilderness when Yahweh constantly appeared to the Israelites, assuring them of his/her presence. But now, over 200 years later, God no longer did what God did during their sacred history. It was left to them simply to complain and grumble about Yahweh's absence.

That seems to be why the Yahwistic author constantly reminds her readers that even during that unique Exodus event, their ancestors also griped and complained about what Yahweh was and wasn't doing. There never was a special sacred history, a time when everything was hunky dory. The Yahwist was convinced that God's working today, just as God worked in the past. We know how to surface that work and presence in the past, but find it difficult to uncover it in the present. The answer to the question above is, "Yes, Yahweh is in our midst. We just don't take the time and make the effort to notice Yahweh's presence."

Paul of Tarsus is a firm believer in the risen Jesus working in our lives right here and now. He/she isn't just killing time, patiently waiting in the wings for us to first change into authentic other Christs before springing into action. Our state of soul isn't a condition for such action. The Apostle reminds the community in Rome of one of our faith's most amazing facts, "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." That insight applies not just to the past or distant future. It means our sacred history is happening all around us, even as we're reading this commentary.

Perhaps the most important line in today's gospel is Jesus' remark to the woman at the well, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." John obviously presumes that "living water" is part of our everyday lives. But it's a part almost no one notices.

Instead of griping and complaining about God abandoning us in crucial situations, we should begin to understand that we've probably abandoned God.

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MARCH 26TH, 2017, FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
I Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9:1-41

One really must know the background of today's I Samuel reading to appreciate what the sacred author is trying to tell us.

This event takes place in the late 11th century BCE while Saul, a rather unstable king, is on the Jewish throne. When Samuel, the last of the judges, complains to Yahweh about the situation, Yahweh tells him to commit high treason: to anoint another king – one of Jesse's sons. Samuel wisely camouflages his visit to Bethlehem by announcing he's going to conduct a communion sacrifice at Jesse's house, not anoint a new king. That's where today's narrative kicks in.

One of the reasons Samuel originally anointed Saul as Israel's first king was because he "stood head and shoulders" above all the country's warriors. As the late Frank Cleary once observed, "He could knock heads better than anyone else." So we presume Samuel is simply looking to replace Saul with another – more stable - head-knocker.

When none of Jesse's seven sons proves to be the king Yahweh wants, Samuel bribes the protesting father to bring in the runt of the litter who's out watching the family flock: "We will not begin the sacrificial banquet until he arrives here." Hearing peoples' stomachs growling, Jesse has no choice. When David finally comes into the house and is anointed, we find the truth in Yahweh's remark, "Not as humans see does God see, because humans see the appearance, but Yahweh looks into the heart."

The sacred author is telling us not to trust our eyes. We only see correctly what God's Spirit leads us to see; a Spirit which always expects us to go deeper than appearances.

That seems to be why the Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Ephesians creates a powerful contrast between light and darkness. "You were once in darkness," he reminds his community, "but now you are light in the Lord." Then quoting from what seems to have been an early Christian baptismal hymn, he pens the memorable words, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." Only through the risen Jesus' Spirit are we able to see what others never seem to notice.

This is the same theme behind John's well-known narrative of the blind beggar. Unlike the Jesus we find in the Synoptics, John's Jesus doesn't demand faith as a condition for working miracles. For the fourth evangelist, faith only comes after the miracle, not before. In this case his blind beggar doesn't ask Jesus for sight. He simply rubs mud in his eyes, tells him to wash it out, and suddenly the man sees. At that point he also begins to see Jesus with the light of faith – gradually.

When he initially talks to his neighbors and friends about his unexpected sight, he simply refers to his benefactor as "the *man* called Jesus." Later, when Jewish leaders interrogate him about the event, he dares go one step further: "He is a *prophet*," he proclaims. Finally, toward the end of the pericope, "he *worshiped* him." His new-found sight eventually enables him to see this Galilean carpenter as God.

No one who's heard the entire chapter can miss the meaning in Jesus' final condemnation of the Pharisees: "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains."

We really have to be careful when we claim we can see what the risen Jesus wants us to do in our everyday lives. Not only were Samuel and the blind beggar expected to look at people and situations with new eyes, so are we. It always takes ever-new, Spirit-filled eyes to actually "learn what is pleasing to the Lord."

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