

Taking the Form of a Slave

Exodus 17:1-7

Philippians 2:1-13

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave....”

When you are zigzagging through the wilderness, thirst and hunger are literal needs of the body. Presently the wilderness is Puerto Rico, whose people continue on the brink of death for lack of food and water. When your need for food and water is literal, survival is everything. But in the biblical narrative, thirst and hunger are also metaphors for the deeper thirst and hunger of the soul for God. Journeying by stages as the Lord commanded, the Israelites camped at Rephidim where there literally was no water. Yet their complaint to Moses can also be heard as the longing of their souls for something they could not give themselves.

“Here is not water but only rock,” T. S. Eliot writes in *The Waste Land*, written after WWI when Europe was just that.

Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock....

In Rephidim there was rock and no water. Yet just before they settle there, we read that they have been journeying by stages *as the Lord commanded*. I take this to mean that God has intended them to camp in a place where they could not assuage their own thirst. Why would God do this? Why *does* God do this?

When you think back on the long way you have come in your own pilgrimage, it seems to me the significant zigs and the memorable zags often are associated with lack rather than luxury, with longing rather than satisfaction, with being hungry for you know not what rather than being sated by more than you can swallow. Add to your inner state the things that come at you from without—imagine yourself in the wreckage that is now Puerto Rico, the collapsed neighborhoods of Mexico City, the bombed out villages of Syria. Or think of the crises of health that have befallen you or your child or your friend, the intimations of mortality that nip at the edges of your illusion of well-being.

What if your experience of being in a place where there is “no water but only rock,” if not caused by God, is nevertheless the experience used by God to make your soul? What if the trials and difficulties you have known are not simply the cruel realities of mortal life but become, in God’s hand, the strange means of grace that just might stop you in your tracks and turn your life Godward?

The decisive drama in the Israelite’s wilderness journey turns on whether the harsh realities of the desert will create a people of complaint and cynicism or whether, over the next forty years, the God who set them free from Pharaoh will become the God on whom they call in extremis, when there “is no water but only rock.” Will this God be the God to whom they belong in life and in death? This is also the decisive drama in your pilgrimage and mine. Whether we are led by God or stumble by chance into the troubles we will see, will those troubles leave us in the shallows of rage and blame or will they become the means used of God to give meaning and purpose and depth to the days we have left?

John Keats wrestled with these questions in a letter famously written to his sister and his brother. With the eloquence of a poet, he poses two understandings of life’s purpose and meaning in the face of what he identifies as “hardships and mortal pains.” The common understanding, he says, “among the misguided and superstitious” is that this world is “‘a vale of tears’ from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to heaven.” In this view, the wilderness journey is pointless and meaningless. As the tee shirt reads: Life is short and then you die. Or as the psalmist says, “The days of our years are threescore years and ten. And if, by reason of strength, they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow, for

it is soon cut off and we fly away.” The words surely hold in solution the understanding of the Israelites at Rephidim: “Here is no water but only rock.” Have you taken us out of Egypt, have we been pulled from our mothers’ wombs, only to suffer and die in the wilderness that is the world?

Keats is asking his siblings to consider a different understanding of life’s purpose and meaning in the face of hardships and mortal pains. “Call the world, if you please, ‘the vale of Soul-making.’ . . . ‘Soul making’ as distinguished from an Intelligence. There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each is personally itself.” How, then, is a soul made? “I can scarcely express what I dimly perceive,” Keats goes on, “and yet I think I perceive it—that you may judge the more clearly, I will put it in the most homely form possible—I will call the world a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read—I will call the human heart the horn Book used in that School—and I will call the Child able to read, the Soul made from that School and its hornbook. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and trouble is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!”

Think of those you know who traverse the wilderness quarreling and complaining, pointing and blaming, when hardships and mortal pains befall them, their minds focused on the immediate and literal needs of their body or their psyche being met, while their hearts are unmoved and untouched and unchanged. Soul-less is a word that comes to mind. Then think of those who have more troubles than Job and yet whose depth of understanding, whose feeling for another’s pain, whose insights concerning life’s meaning have been wrought by those very troubles.

When the Israelites respond to hardship and mortal pain with quarreling and complaint, Moses, their teacher in the School of Soul-making, asks a question that invites them into a relationship with the God who has led them to the rock with no water. “Why do you test God?” The question means to make the Israelites do business with the deeper thirst of their yet to be formed souls. They refuse. At his wit’s end, Moses asks God what he is to do with this people who are about to stone him. God tells Moses to get out ahead of the people so as not to be drawn into their quarreling and to take some of the elders, some of the wiser heads, to the place where God will be waiting for them. With the elders as witnesses, Moses strikes the rock, water flows, elders see, the people drink. Moses calls the place Massah and Meribah, because there the Israelites quarreled, thinking life to be a vale of tears; and yet they took the first step in Soul-making, they tested God, they entered into a relationship with God by asking ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”

The question is our question still, asked in a world of hardships and mortal pains, even and especially by those around the world who have come to be fed at Christ’s table today. Granting that God is among us in Jesus Christ, our question is whether Christ came among us to redeem us from this vale of tears? Or was God himself born a slave and changed by what he suffered in this vale of Soul-making? Is that God now living among us and going before us to the places where our hunger and thirst just may become the occasion for us to trust God, follow God, and call on God to give us what we cannot give ourselves.

When Christ Jesus quit the Godhead and, as the ancient hymn chants, emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, in him God embarked on a journey and entered the wilderness, the waste land, the places where people hungered and thirsted for God in a world without God. He assumed our literal thirsts and hungers; he assumed our hardships and mortal pains; which is to say, he assumed the death we must die. His brief life zigzagged in such a way that there was no going back to God until he died on a cross. But in his death, according to the late, great theologian Robert Jenson, God’s identity was changed. Dare I say, God’s soul was made? On the cross, God was “unequivocally identified as a God . . . of life precisely in spite of, *indeed using and transforming death*, [a God of] fulfillment in spite of, *indeed including alienation*.” The God who came among us as a slave is the God who is among us in this vale of Soul-making, feeding our deepest hungers with the bread of heaven, slaking our insatiable thirst for meaning with the cup of salvation.

“Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness,” Moses says to the Israelites as he dies. “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna . . . in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” Thanks be to God.