

Exodus 17: 8-13

The Promised Land: #5 in the Stages of Faith

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Forty years ago James Fowler wrote a book entitled Stages of Faith. A professor of psychology at Harvard and Boston College Fowler was one of the first people in modern time to identify the different ways that people search for meaning in life. He believed that faith developed differently in different people. He traced the way that faith grows for people at different stages of life. Infants and small children believe intuitively in their parents; they trust completely. By the time that boys and girls go to elementary school they have a very literal understanding of faith. They ask questions like – Exactly where does God live? How does prayer work? What is a miracle? Teenagers look to their peers to know what to believe. They seek mirrors in order to see life more clearly. A church with a strong youth groups gives kids a place to explore faith because provides a safe place where teens feel surrounded by people who know them.

Young adults in late twenties and early thirties are figuring things out for themselves, and striving to discover how to find meaning in their lives. While they may have friends, their search for meaning may be very personal as they explore and differentiate the one path for them. Once people feel totally secure in their own faith they grow more open to other beliefs. Once of you told me that you are a Christian but you also believe firmly in reincarnation; you accept a synthesis of various beliefs at this stage of faith.

In our church we don't ask you to sign a creed in order to join. We ask you to sign a welcome book. Membership in this church implies that you have joined a group of modern pilgrims who are seeking meaningful lives of faith today. In our church we find people at each stage – even at different times of

life. This month we are looking at how faith grows in each of us. Using the story of Moses we have identified 4 stages so far.

- Step #1 is Curiosity. You have to want more to seek faith. You might have all the material things this world can offer, or enough, but still be hungry for spiritual gifts. That is step #1.
- Step #2 is Hearing a Call. Heike had a cell phone call in the service that week, and talked to God. Most of us don't get God on our phones, but we can gain a sense of direction, and feel God challenging us, or drawing us to holy space.
- Step #3 is Taking a Journey But faith involves action. Moses stepped out into the Red Sea and then the waters parted. You need to start a journey and God will be right there with you.
- Step #4 – The Wilderness: Last week we talked about the wilderness. Once the Hebrews had crossed the Red Sea, the headiness of the escape gave way to the dreary reality that they would have to survive in the wilderness. But the wilderness was the place where they learned to trust God. Hard as it was, that part of the journey was the making of them.

- **Today we will talk about the Promised Land**

When God called Moses to free the people, God promised that they would all be led to a new place. God never promised that the journey would be easy, but God did promise that it would not be in vain. After 40 years of traveling through the wilderness, the people were led to a new land, which was to be their home. It was a place where they would be free. They might have to work hard, but God promised that they would be working for themselves. No overlords, no slavery, no oppression. What does the notion of the Promised Land have to tell us for our lives today?

In the first place, God is always calling us to a better place. You need hope to take a faith journey. You might draw near to God because you are curious. You may even hear God's voice calling you and be ready to leave your comfort zone and venture forth with courage. But

every life and every faith journey involves some time in the wilderness. No one gets very far without hope.

When Moses reached the Red Sea, it was not just desperation that made him turn to God for help that day. It was hope that God might have a plan, and unseen path to deliverance. That habit of hoping for more than he could see, guided Moses each day. When the people grew hungry and complained bitterly, Moses did not give up. He did not accept defeat. He did not give into despair, and turn around and march them all back to Egypt- which might have seemed closer than the Promised Land. No he held out hope that God would come to their aid. He turned to God and insisted that God address the people's needs. Some of our most insistent prayers come from a deep and persistent hope that won't give up.

In today's passage the Hebrews were attacked by the Amalekites who robbed the elderly at the back of the pack and harassed the slower Hebrews. Moses had enough, and sent Joshua to fight the Amalekites. Moses watched from a mountain. As long as Moses had his hands up the soldiers could see him, and they were victorious. But Moses' arms grew tired and he needed to rest, but whenever he put them down, the Hebrew soldiers fell back. They could fight bravely, as long as they could look up and find some hope.

A year ago after a rash of suicides among gay and lesbian teens, gay adults designed a YouTube Project called- "It Gets Better" . People like Ellen DeGeneris, Stephen Colbert, Neil Patrick Harris Max Adler and Chris Goffer, from Glee produced videos in which they talk about their own struggles growing up. They share poignant stories about how they survived and went on to accomplish great things. *It Gets Better* reminds teens being bullied to recognize that even if they find themselves in the wilderness of high school, there is a promised land ahead, and they can get there. Hope of a better day is a powerful comfort and incentive.

When you live with hope it gives you strength and courage that defies logic. When you live with hope, God makes your step lighter, even when you carry some heavy burdens.

Finally, the Promised Land is not a place; it is a state of mind.

When God led the people out of Egypt God promised Moses that they would all go to a better place: place where they could live with dignity; a place where they could hold their heads up; a place where no one would beat them or oppress them.

Though Moses describes a spot which the people associated with some real estate up north, something changed for the Hebrews as soon as they started to journey with God. Once they crossed the Red Sea, they started to pray for guidance, and ask God for food. As they journeyed that came to depend on God more and more each day. When Moses gave them the Ten Commandments, they learned to rely on God's wisdom- and to understand that God could give advice that would make them happy – Honor your mother and faith, Don't steel or kill or covet. Put your faith first and your life will make more sense.

Slowly but surely the Promise of a future land of freedom and justice for all people – was not so far off. They started to live the promise each day. Every day that they learned to live with dignity as free men and women the promise was a distant dream; it came to them. It was not about a destination; it was a way of life, a goal that became real every morning, once they caught a glimpse of God's plan.

This notion of a future Promised Land is very seductive. We want to believe in a perfect place. We want there to be a Camelot. Over the centuries as the Hebrew people settled in the new land life was not as perfect as they imagined it might be. It was normal. They had good years and bad ones. They were conquered again, by a series of empires that wanted to control the trade routes that went through Israel. Overtime the Jews fixed their hopes on another dream- another ideal. Someday, God would send

a Messiah who would come to make life better. It was similar to the notion of a Promised Land – Somewhere out there in the future God was planning to bring justice to the poor, and righteousness upon the earth, and a Messiah would make it happen. A great warrior would beat back the Romans. People of faith would be rewarded for their perseverance. For hundreds of years the Jewish people prayed that they might see this Messiah.

When Jesus came to Galilee- 1500 years after the Exodus, and 500 years after the first thought of a Messiah, he did not really meet anyone's expectations for a Messiah. For one thing, he did not really believe in a distant Promise. He told people that God wants you to have the promise here and now. It is not in the future. It is not so magical. It is not even all in God's hands. You can begin to bring God's promises to life here each day. Some of the Hebrews best experiences happened while they were lost in the wilderness. Some of their worst times and most dreadful mistakes happened after they found the Promised Land.

It is easy for us to pin our hopes and dreams on a special destination. It is tempting to assume that paradise will unfold when we find the perfect house, or the right neighborhood. Some folks associate the Promised Land with a community like Needham, or Wellesley or Dover. The Promised land is not a place. Jesus says that God's kingdom is all around us.

Mother Theresa was a nun from Poland and she had some vacation time, and took a trip to India. While she was in Calcutta, she was appalled to see that the untouchable class was so despised that she found people dying in the gutter, suffering torment, alone, forgotten, despised. Mother Theresa heard God's call in those gutters, and changed her life. She created hospice care for the lowest of the low. In this way, she declared that every child of God is worthy to die with dignity. So Mother Theresa created a Promised Land in the poorest slums on earth. In responding to God's call she had found the 5th stage of faith.

I don't know which part of this journey speaks to you now. I don't believe this is a linear path. I do know that whatever age you are – when you are curious about life- you put yourself into a position to be stepping out onto holy ground. When you pursue your questions and doubt with eagerness and openness, then you may set the stage to hear a new call from God. When you face your fears – you cannot help but begin to journey. When you find yourself in a wilderness, you may be struggling, but also closer to God than you realized. I also know that the Promised Land is place of possibility in each of us. It is a place where God breathes new life into ordinary days, and time really does not matter much at all. I know that there are sweet spots in life where we all stop and see that God is real, and we can be whole, and love is making all things new.