

“On What Grounds?”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
e-Worship
September 27, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7
Matthew 21:23-32

“I am wondering which is true,” my daughter asked me, and went on to tell me about one of her classmates who tried to correct her when she said that humans share a common, evolutionary ancestor with apes. “Well, I don’t believe that,” her classmate told her, “because I believe the Bible.” Now, you have to understand: my daughter *loves* Bible, and relishes in its stories and characters. And, she also loves science, and if you asked could probably tell you some favorite scientists and what they did for our modern age. Something she never thought was a conflict became, thanks to a classmate, an either-or decision. She told him, “Well, I believe the science,” and then couldn’t resist throwing out this trump card as well, “and my mom’s The Pastor.” To which her classmate responded, “Well, my Aunt is The Pastor.”

“Fantastic!” I told my daughter. “Tell your classmate to give his aunt my number so we can share tea!” And I mean it. Because I suspect somewhere beyond the questions of authority, there is the spirit of a person I might want to know, and that as women clergy we might find more in common than different. And I told my daughter that she made a good choice, and that she can still love the Bible and its messages and love science. The Bible is not a scientific document; it’s human’s best attempt at expressing how they see God at work in their lives. We look to its stories and wisdom for meaning and truth, but not for scientific or historical accuracy. There is no reason science and our faith cannot be friends, and hopefully, one can make the other even better.

The gospel passage for our worship begins with a question of authority, and those asking want Jesus to make a choice. “By what authority,” the chief priests and elders asked Jesus, “are you doing these things, and *who* gave you this authority?” Mind you, Jesus had just cleansed the Temple of its money changers and those who sold birds for sacrifices, and then at the same time welcomed in the blind and the lame while children praised him. It simply wasn’t how things were done before, and so they wanted to know whether it was the Worship Committee, the Session, God, or something more human, like the Mission Committee, that had voted this, using Robert’s Rules of Order.

30 years ago, a group called ACTUP-- AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power-- entered St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Manhattan. Most of them were dressed in ordinary clothing, so they blended in with the regular worshippers. But partway through the mass, they stood up and started demanding that the Cardinal stop using his authority in ways that were furthering the spread of HIV and AIDS. They pointed out the Cardinal’s and Catholic Church’s stance against condom usage and safer sex, at a time when HIV had already killed tens of thousands of gay men in

New York City, and his discrimination against LGBTQ people were adding to ignorance and fear, as AIDS patients suffered in the shadows of shame. As the mass continued, several made their ways into the aisles of the great cathedral, and laid their bodies on the ground for a “die-in” demonstration, to create a visual of those who have needlessly died of AIDS.

I assure you this group did not have the blessing or authority of the church. They did not have the authority of political power behind them-- in fact, the New York City Mayor attended the cathedral that day, to show his support for the Cardinal.

30 years ago, very few people supported this action; even within the AIDS movement, several felt like churches should be left alone. And yet, now we see how much the efforts towards visibility eventually brought the AIDS epidemic to a huge turnaround: better care, effective pharmaceuticals, and preventative and therapeutic vaccines. The movement that first acted up in the interests of queer people eventually served the much broader, global population that would also be vulnerable to HIV and AIDS.

These were the blind and the lame, the tax collectors and prostitutes who would have been shunned from the Temple grounds back in Jesus’ day-- and yet Jesus was showing that these are exactly the people whom God longs to welcome and to love.

I stand on the grounds of my predecessors, people who acted up enough to bring LGBTQ voices into the mainstream and even into the church. Now, it is not quite so difficult for me to stand in a place that integrates a love for Jesus Christ, with an affirmation of myself. When the chief priests and elders challenged Jesus to come up with whether his authority was human or divine, he would not answer. I think that is because it is a false choice; Jesus was fully human, *and* fully divine. He occupied a space that was not either-or, and so invites us into those spaces as well.

This is a God who cares for us when we are neither here nor there, and it’s the same God who acted on behalf of the thirsty Israelites wandering through the desert. When Moses led the people into the wilderness, he also walked the Israelites on the grounds of freedom, and on the grounds of belonging. No longer were the Hebrews slaves to Egypt and Pharaoh’s agenda. They belonged with God. And while Moses helped to navigate them through these grounds, he did not do so by his own authority. He needed to rely on God. Not only that, but he also had his more eloquent brother, Aaron, to be his spokesman, and his sister, Miriam-- without whom he would not have even lived. Miriam, who was described as a prophetess, hovered over Moses as a baby when he was placed in a basket on the Nile, watching from the reeds to see that he got scooped up by Pharaoh’s daughter and popping out to offer their own mother as a nursemaid for him.

The Exodus story, which speaks of the thirst of the wandering Hebrews, has a parallel story in Numbers, the 4th book of the Torah. Numbers 20 begins, The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there.

Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron.”

There’s a Jewish tradition that speaks of Miriam’s Well, that is, a well that traveled with the Hebrews through the wilderness. Wherever Miriam went, that well of water would spring forth. But when Miriam died, the water dried up. And the people panicked; without Miriam, would they die of thirst?

In this season of anxiety and loss, I understand; I hold deep compassion for the panic of the Israelites. We just lost Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Like the Israelite who panicked when Miriam died, wondering, “who will now provide us with water?” I wonder, “who will provide us with justice?” For some, this is an entirely theoretical question, but for others, whose marriage, whose bodies, whose belonging, have been protected by her authority, intelligence and integrity, those questions may shape matters of daily life. Like the Israelites who wondered if perhaps going back to the time of slavery in Egypt would be better for them-- at least they had *water*-- I also wonder how I might escape these hard times: through ice cream, or a vacation in the days after the election (“*are you kidding?*” asked my wife who works in news, reminding me that the news won’t be over on November 3), or a commune that only allows people who just think like me.

But then I think about how many people before me dared to do the impossible, with incredible results, and I wonder: how dare I think of giving up? Like tapping water out of a rock, they blew everyone’s expectations away. Beethoven composed some of his most famous pieces as he was going deaf, and even after he had lost all hearing. Albert Einstein was dyslexic and autistic, and yet the world has benefited from his genius. Sojourner Truth had been bought and sold into slavery 4 times when she escaped with her infant daughter Sophia. She went on to be a powerful evangelist, abolitionist and suffragist. When some encouraged her to put the voting rights of black men before the voting rights of women, she refused, saying both should be worked on simultaneously. Jerry Yang came to the United States when he was 10 years old, and he says that at that time, he only knew one English word: “*shoe*.” He went on to become the co-founder of Yahoo!

Now, if you’re anything like me, you might be saying to yourself, “But I am just not that exceptional! Maybe I have met with hardship, but you have never seen *me* bringing forth water from a stone.” That may be true, but there **is** good news for you-- and me-- nonetheless.

The focus of the story isn’t supposed to be what miracle Moses performs. The real wonder is what happens when the whole people complain. I could call this sermon “the holy kvetch,” because I believe it is actually the people’s complaining that actually gets God to respond. Remember how Jesus asked, “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?”

I find the Israelites’ grumbling in the wilderness rather childlike-- not in a bad way, but in the way that evokes in God the same kind of response I have when a child has needs. If my daughter is

thirsty, I get her water. If she is hungry, I make food. If she needs clean clothes, I reach for the Tide off the top of the dryer and hand it to her, telling her with love and encouragement to do it herself. The same goes for children I meet in my community, whether through church, Oelhaf House, or among my daughter's schoolmates. I will help them find what they need, or teach them how to get it. I see the same from you; I know a number of kids in our church will turn to Anne Stebbins if they are hungry after church and want communion leftovers; to Judy Nyirongo if they want a good story, or to Pete Shanno if they simply need a hug. Linda McGarry will make sure that care extends beyond our sanctuary, as she's spent years coordinating hosts for families with children as they receive shelter in Leonia, through Family Promise.

There is actually something remarkable about asking. It shows a belief, a trust, in God's authority, that something *can* happen. I want that kind of trust with God. I want it to show up in my prayer life. I want it to show up in my hopes for what this world can be. I want it to show up in ways that *make me more able* to show up-- for my family, for our church, for the country. Sometimes God will provide directly, and sometimes God will not-- but maybe the Holy Spirit will lead us to provide for ourselves and for others, until the ground on which we stand looks less like a desert and more like something of promise. May it be so.