

“Between Promise and Fulfillment”

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World Communion Sunday

Presbyterian Church In Leonia

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A beautiful, sunny day like today \*almost\* makes us forget about a week when we barely saw the sun; when our streets flooded, water seeped into basement floors, and our pets and children became cranky from not being able to go outside. “Didn’t you promise you would never again flood the earth, God?” I asked, as I watched videos of cars swallowed by water in my mother-in-law’s neighborhood in Queens. I looked glumly at yet another soggy day, knowing full well that what we saw in this corner of NJ is nothing compared to the floods and other natural disasters still known around the world. I told my daughter to ask some friends over to play games on Saturday, hoping that our household at least could stave off cranky boredom caused by cabin fever.

I remember those days of cranky boredom growing up, when my mama just needed a little time to relax from the demands of single parenting, but I wanted something to do. I would whine and beg, asking if we could make plans with a friend. My mom had a genius response to this: “If you ask me again, the answer is definitely *no!*” This quieted the whining on my end— and to her credit, my mom would usually relent and, refreshed by my silence, help me make the plans I wanted. As for me, in that period of waiting, I would be on my best behavior, with hopes that my mom would notice and I would find my reward.

The Hebrew people had an incredibly long period of waiting, between God’s promise and the fulfillment of God’s promise. But they weren’t exactly on their best behavior. I can’t say that I blame them. Here is what God had promised to the people in Exodus: that they would be free from their captivity in Egypt; that God would be their God, and they would be God’s people; and that God would bring them to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

They had already achieved the first part of that promise: they had been freed, liberated, in a dramatic way, from their enslavement in Egypt, tromping through the Red Sea which parted to make way for them, and then swallowed up the Egyptian army chasing after them.

They may have felt iffy about the second part of that promise. Though God had promised to be their God, and that they would be God’s people, their trust grew thin. Especially when they were hungry. Especially when they were thirsty. Especially when they wanted to see and hear and touch God, but to them, God felt invisible, silent, absent. Have you ever felt that way? Like you needed some kind of earthly assurance that God was with you, only to find empty? Even though I am a pastor who has staked my vocation on sharing God’s word, I can assure you there have been times when I have questioned whether God’s word was with me.

And then, the final part of that promise- that God would lead them to a land of milk and honey? Well, enough days, months, years of wandering in a wilderness, and you forget what it is like to dream. Instead of looking forward to the bounty of God's promises, they looked backward. They painted a rosier picture of their years of enslavement, saying, "Why did you even bring us out of Egypt? To kill us with thirst?" Yes. They were so thirsty, that they would rather have been enslaved than to feel the scratchy throat, the drying up of their bodies, the fear that they might die.

They were so thirsty, that the covenant God promised to them didn't feel worth much.

One of the hardest parts of being a practicing Christian is that we are called to hope for things that are promised, but that are not yet seen. The Hebrew people spent 40 years wandering the wilderness before they saw the Promised Land. Those who loved and followed Jesus had to wait three days after he died, before they could witness resurrection. And today we are still waiting for the day when, as the prophets promised, the lion will lie down with the lamb. On this World Communion Sunday, we break bread and name the truth that we still live in a broken world.

So what are we to do when we find ourselves wandering between in the space between God's promises to us, and the fulfillment of them in our lives, in our souls, and in our world? How are we to continue to be a hopeful people, people whose thirst is quenched, even when we have not yet arrived?

Our friends at Teaneck Presbyterian Church are managing to be stewards of hope, when the future is not certain. They have been without an installed pastor for more than a year now, and have dealt with illnesses and death of beloved members in that time. I should be taking notes from them, on what hope means in that space between promise and fulfillment.

But our scripture offers some helpful advice, on how to be hopeful people in that time between promise and fulfillment.

As God advises Moses on how to respond to the Hebrews' complaints about no water, the New Revised Standard Version says, "Go on ahead of the people." But the Hebrew more precisely translates into "Pass the faces of the people." So in order to respond to the peoples' need, Moses had to first pass by their faces. He had to see and witness their fear, their frustration, and their thirst. By witnessing, he gained some power to change the situation. As we belong to the global Body of Christ, we become more powerful in our care for one another when we can face each other's pain.

Even though I have now lived outside my hometown of Atlanta, Georgia nearly more years than I lived there, I still have a great interest in news from my home. I recently learned of a movement to tell the story of a massacre that happened in a South Atlanta neighborhood of Brownsville, in 1906. Shamefully, this history was never taught to me in my Atlanta public schools. The massacre had been toward a prosperous neighborhood of Black homeowners and

businesspeople, many of whom had been educated at the nearby HBCUs. A mob of white men tore into the neighborhood, pulling people out of barber shops and other stores, dragging them off of streetcars. Between 25-40 were killed that day. Now a community organizer named Darrin Sims is trying to bring these lives, these stories, into the memory of Atlantans— who have been fed on the myth that Atlanta is “the city that is too busy to hate.” Sims quoted the author James Baldwin, in saying, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Atlanta has to **face** its history with honesty and repentance, if it is to live into its potential as a city for all people.

For Moses, it was not enough that he had a special line of communication open to God. That alone did not give him the power he needed— not until he looked into the **face** of the deep suffering of his fellow Israelites in its rawness was he granted the power to overcome their deep thirst.

Another thing we can learn from our Exodus passage today is to take some folks with you. Moses certainly gets lots of credit, but he didn't go it alone, and neither should we. God instructed Moses to take some of the elders with him. What many people find when they come to church is that they don't have to go it alone. For some, this is the very salvation they need: to know that in this world, they have a community where they belong, where their burdens are held and their joys uplifted. A place where someone can hold your baby so your arms can rest for a spell, and where arms that are empty can find someone to hold. Church is a place where, if you find you have come to a point where you have no hope, there are people who can take on the job of doing the hoping for you, until you can once again have faith in the promise that God wants and works for liberation and for milk and honey in your life.

Finally, we must remember that God told Moses, “I will be standing in front of you on the rock at Horeb.” I don't know if I can picture what that would even look like, because the point is, again, that Moses isn't on his own here. God was right there. And the real power to transform the rock into a bubbling spring didn't come from Moses. It didn't come from Moses' staff. It came from God. So, we can allow ourselves a little forgiveness for all we *can't* do. It's not all up to us. At some point, God will meet us, and whatever effort we are able to muster up, and *help* us to find a way out of no way.

So there is some hope in that space between what God promises us, and the fulfillment of us seeing those promises met. And we can remember, that at the same time that we are waiting on God to show up and fulfill God's promises, God is waiting on us too— just like that man in the vineyard. Don't think that what you have to bring isn't worth it to God; don't turn around and give up even before you take the chance to show God what it is you can offer. As Jesus' parable tells us, God is delighted to welcome it all: the tax collector, the prostitute, the one who shows up late.

However, and whenever we come, God shows us a welcome. In Jesus Christ, God sets a table, to make sure to meet our hunger and our thirst with something that is abundant, renewing, and loving. At this table, may we gather, face to face, and be *changed* so that we can then see the

face of Christ in the world God loves. Not alone, but with each other and with God, may we take one step closer to the promises God makes for us and for God's world.