

“Honey from the Rock”
Text: Psalm 81; II Corinthians 9:6-8
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
November 15, 2009

I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you. Psalm 81:16

When I sat down at my desk at home on Thursday afternoon, my intention was to write this sermon. I booted up the computer, logged on to Word, and typed in “Honey from the Rock”. Just as I did so, a bird sitting on the deck outside my window began to chirp. Actually, it was not a chirp – it was a fuss. It was a very loud, ugly...I’m not going to do bird imitations, but I want you to know it wasn’t good. I have a tape of sounds that bird specimens in Atlanta make, but I didn’t have time to listen to the tape; I needed to write a sermon, so I remain in the dark as to the identity of the obviously irritated feathered friend. It could have been a yellow rumped warbler (there is such a bird), but it was probably a blue jay. But whatever it was, that guy had a problem, and he needed to complain about it for 20 minutes. Obviously, I needed to complain about it to you, but I promise it won’t take me 20 minutes. I’m done now.

In the Bible, people do a lot of complaining. They murmur, and they whine. Think about the exodus from Egypt. Between the leaving and the arriving in the Promised Land, the Hebrews had to wander in the wilderness for a long time. Along the way, they encountered many obstacles and in the face of almost every one, they threw a pity party. From the get-go they were complaining to Moses: “Pharaoh’s army is going to catch up with us; we would have been better off if we’d stayed in Egypt.” Of course, Pharaoh’s armies were vanquished by the Lord, and the Hebrew people were safe. Three days later, they grumbled again about the bitterness of their drinking water. Again, Moses interceded on their behalf before the Lord, and Moses was instructed by the Lord to pick up a piece of wood and throw it into the water and that would make the water sweet, and so it came to be. Soon, the griping was about hunger. In answer, the Lord saw to it that manna fell fresh from heaven upon the earth every morning. Then, what did they gripe about? Lack of variety in their diet. The Lord sent quail. As they traveled by stages through the wilderness, their water supply became low. They complained, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us, our children and our livestock with thirst?”

By this time Moses really had had it, and he threw his own pity party. “What am I going to do with these people?” he cried to the Lord.

The Lord said, “Go before them; take the elders with you. Take in your hand the staff that you struck the Nile with. I will be standing in front of you on the rock of Horeb. Hit the rock with the rod, and water will come out and the people can

drink.” That is exactly what happened. Moses named that place using two Hebrew words. It is either called “Massah” or “Mirabah”. “Massah” means “complaining and quarreling” in Hebrew. “Mirabah” means “testing”.

Throughout the entire journey, the Israelites wondered, “Is the Lord with us or not?” Here’s the question: Were the Hebrews wrong to whine? They really did have problems. They weren’t wrong about the enemy breathing down their neck, or the bitterness of the water, or the same old, same old quality of the manna. They actually were right about the challenges they were facing, but what they were wrong about, what they again and again failed to take into account was the nature of God - the covenanting nature of God, who will fulfill promises made. The sustaining presence of God, the merciful care of God in every situation along the way, along the journey to the Promised Land: that was what the Hebrew people had a problem remembering.

Do you ever watch the Travel Channel? I like the Travel Channel. I like to see how relaxed people are on their trips. Nobody seems to have had his or her suitcase sent to Salt Lake instead of Acapulco. No, there they are in Acapulco in their bathing suits, which were in their luggage, and they are happy! They probably had a sauna in the morning. A waiter with a white coat leans over them handing them a frosty drink with a little pink umbrella in it. I like to think that when I travel, my trips are going to be problem-free and full of delights. I wish that the rest of my life on earth will be problem-free and full of delight alone, but actually, there will be problems and fears to face down. As someone wise has said, “In this business called human life, it’s hard to get 24 smooth hours in a row.”

Well, the Israelites had two choices: the fear choice or the faith choice. We can either trust God in every circumstance, or we can give up on God.

Counselors, psychologists make a distinction between what they call “the presenting problem” and “the underlying problem.” Let’s say a couple comes in for therapy. He says, “She’s always nagging me about turning the TV off and not watching sports all weekend.” She says, “He never talks to me anymore.” The underlying problem is that she wants to know, “Do I still make a difference to you? Do you still love me?” That was the Hebrews’ question. Does God still love us in the midst of our situation? Is God still there? Their journey had asked more of them than they had imagined. They were afraid of the perils that would greet them the next morning. They were afraid of the future that lay ahead of them. The Promised Land was an abstract concept, and abstract concepts are virtually no comfort at all.

In our Prayer of Confession today, together, we said, “Holy and most merciful God, you know how often we have sinned in *forgetting your love*.” What a concept! There is a connection between forgetting God’s love and sin. Perhaps the widest doorway to sin is the doorway we enter when we forget God’s love. When we feel unloved, ignored, unimportant, how easy it is to fall into pessimism,

hopelessness, even despair. I know the Bible says that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, but I believe that the kind of forgetfulness that leads to *Who gives a hoot?* is a much deeper problem. Once you say God doesn't care whether the soldiers of the Pharaoh capture you or not, whether your children are thirsty or hungry, then why should you care about yourself or your community or the world that is your home?

“How often I have sinned in forgetting your love.”

The writer of the 81st Psalm wanted the Hebrew people, for whom the exodus had become ancient history, not to forget the constancy of God. He quoted the Lord to them: “Remember I am the one who relieved the shoulder of your burden”, referring to the yoke of slavery. “I answered you in the secret place of thunder,” a reference to Mount Sinai where God spoke to Moses, giving guidance to the people. “I brought you out of the land of Egypt. I gave you water and Mirabah. Now, open your mouths, and I will fill them. To your ancestors I gave bread and water, but to you, I want to give the finest wheat. I gave your ancestors water from the rock, but to you, I'm giving honey from the rock. No more manna morning, noon and night, but bread of the finest wheat. I want you to do more than survive. I want you to rejoice and be glad.” Please note God's generosity. That's the nature of our God, and that is what we are capable of being ourselves.

A few thousand years have passed since the Psalmist's words were written, but God's nature continues to be generous, merciful, and watchful. Human nature has not changed either. We still stay on that teeter totter, one day having faith and the other day sinking in fear - one day thinking, “Oh my Lord. I'm not going to have enough!” And another day we say, “Whew, God does supply every real need of mine.”

Is this universe a place of scarcity or place of abundance? The disciples thought it was a world of scarcity. They had no idea that Jesus could feed 5,000 people with seven loaves of bread and a few fish, but Jesus could.

Who could have imagined that Morningside Presbyterian Church, through the generous, merciful, and watchful nature of God, would become the lively faith community we are today? God has given us in recent years more than just survival rations. Is there anyone in our community today who hasn't tasted at least once, in recent months, honey from the rock? Something that's so sweet, that delights and fills our souls? Tami, when you stood up and sang this morning, I tasted honey from the rock. It's here! God blesses us Sunday after Sunday, week after week. God wants us to have more than bread and water. God wants to feed us with rich, spiritual food. Who could've imagined that when we were wandering around in the wilderness?

I love the picture of that big old rock, the mount of Horeb, made out of granite or some other solid mass of petrified matter. Who would ever have imagined honey from a rock? From a beehive, yes, but rocks are not known for their productivity.

In a startling passage from John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin suggests that God gives us the necessary things of our lives not only as gifts to provide for our necessities, but to give us "delight" and "good cheer". (1) In our spirit today and in recent weeks, I sense genuine joy and expectation and hope. We are moving forward by faith on our journey to the Promised Land. I know there's a certain anxiety floating around about the future, but I also know that God who invited us to embark on the particular journey we are on has promised to be faithful to us every step along the way.

This is Commitment Sunday, and the choice is clear. We will either make the fear choice or the faith choice; we will either give or not, based on whether we're worried about having enough or whether we rely on the reality of divine abundance. "Our God is one who calls us to be a pilgrim people," William Sloane Coffin said. "Ours is a God of history - a history marked by exodus, one that anticipates a new song. . . a new heaven and a new earth. God presents us with a future... right up to the end of life." (2) If we were to die day after tomorrow, there is still a future to look forward to: the one day we have to live on this earth and all the days we will live in the high heavenly places with Christ our Savior.

I don't want to sound like Dr. Phil this morning, but I am convinced that God will give this congregation what is needed, not only to survive but to thrive. I am convinced that God will give you what you need. If a negative, worried-about-yourself attitude is closing you in this Sunday morning, I think today would be a very good day for you to get over it. God is good, and you would be wise to *remember* it!

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the relief offering, he was not addressing an affluent congregation. These were regular people; in fact, some of them had only recently been slaves. They barely managed; yet, Paul asked them to give not only as they were able, but beyond. Isn't it amazing that he was asking them to relieve the sufferings of others when they barely had two denarii to rub together? But that's the way it works: Relief of suffering from those who don't have much, honey from the rock. God pulls off miracle after miracle.

No one is saying there's nothing to worry about; there is always plenty. Sometimes it can even be cathartic to whine a little bit, but praise and thanks to God are a million times more cathartic than whining and worrying. God has given us not only what we need to survive but also all those other things that make us glad.

All thanks and praise to God from whom all blessing flow, who loved us so much that God decided to give God's own self in Jesus Christ, that we might be nourished, liberated and filled with the light of life.

This last week as our nation observed Veterans Day, I remembered something in my files that I had been saving for years - words from a piece of paper found in the pocket of a soldier who lost his life in the Civil War. Though these words have been commandeered by sentimentalists more than once, I believe they contain great wisdom:

“I asked God for strength that I might achieve. I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for help that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I was asked for power that I might receive praise. I was given weakness that I might feel the need for God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life, but I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for, but everything that I hoped for.”

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

(1) As quoted by Mark S. Burrows in *Weavings*, November/December 2005.

(2) *The Courage to Love*.