

It is Well with My Soul Exodus 16: 2-15 Philippians 1:21-30

So how about those ancient Israelites? Just a short time ago in the story, they were dancing and singing praises to God, following Miriam with her tambourine, celebrating their miraculous, safe passage out of Egypt and through the Red Sea to the other side. Then here we are today, barely ten minutes further along in the story line, and they are muttering and complaining that they should have stayed in Egypt! Of course it's easy for us, from this vantage point, to see their fickleness. But when I'm honest, I have to admit I could have done the same thing. My life's story has plenty of episodes where I thought I found the great panacea, only to turn sour, or at least neutral on the thing in record time. Its usually less significant stuff than escape from slavery...would that it had that kind of depth! My panaceas have been things like HAVING to get contact lenses when I was a teenager, and really believing, in some deep place inside of me, that if I did, my life would be wholly transformed. Well, you know the outcome. I did get them, and I really enjoyed them, and after a few weeks, they sort of faded into the normalcy of my daily life, and I didn't think much about them. And after awhile, I decided they were too much of a hassle, and went back to glasses.

My husband teases me that at any given time there, I have some house project in mind that I deep down believe will "really change my life". He even says to me, when I suggest some new thing, (right now it's redoing the kitchen,) "and I suppose this is the one that will really, forever, make you happy..."

But we're like that, aren't we? Several parishioners, over the years, have told me similar stories. One woman, as a girl, grew up hearing about the magic of being "sweet sixteen" and truly believed her life would take off when she hit that milestone...When the long awaited birthday finally came, it introduced a year full of loss and disappointment. Another person told of waiting to go to the World's Fair, and just knowing that this would be the experience that would somehow change everything. But when she got there, she found out she was still her regular self, just in another place. We humans tend to put all our eggs in whatever basket we have currently latched onto, and to

think that once that long-sought goal is realized, life will be “wholly other”...once I get the new job or the promotion...once the baby comes...once I retire...once I get this or that particular monkey off my back...once I get out of Egypt.

And then eventually, the thing does happen, and we learn the long, slow lesson of maturity, which is “very few things are ever as good or as bad as they seem at first.” In other words, life has a way of normalizing, like water, it seeks its own level, no matter what the external circumstances. And we need to look not so much to circumstances to make us happy, but to our inner approach, our reactions and judgements about the thing, and to God, walking with us right in the midst of our ordinary days and lives., even the terribly painful ones.

Consider this: the ancient Hebrews got what they wanted...they were freed from the oppressors, and delivered safely to the other shore of the Red Sea. And in no time, they were again miserable. Paul, on the other hand, from today's Epistle Reading, was in prison...knowing he could be killed at any moment, and from those circumstances, wrote the exultant, joyful words we heard this morning. “I rejoice in the Lord” Paul said, “and I don't know which to prefer...life or death...because to live is to be with you in the Spirit, but to die is to be immediately with Christ, so I can't lose.” That's the kind of freedom and contentment that comes when you let go of having SPECIFIC EXPECTATIONS about your life, and instead, turn it all over...you can still have a general sense of expectancy, that God will be with you in it, will sustain and empower and nourish you as you need it day by day. And it won't always be easy...just like it wasn't for Paul. Sometimes we are called to do hard things! To go through hard times! But when we trust God to walk us through it, then even in those hard times, there can be a deep seated sense of peace. It makes me think of that final speech given by Dr. King, just a couple of days before his assassination. It had an eerie, prophetic quality to it. He said to the people, “Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that

now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man."

My brothers and sisters in the faith, I say to you today, THAT'S FREEDOM! Whether you are in Egypt or in the desert; whether in the promised land or in a Roman Prison, it's that attitude that gives freedom and the deep seated joy we're all looking for, even though we may THINK we'll find it in a new bathroom or turning 16 or going to the world's fair or reversing the current diagnosis. Instead, we'll find it in letting go of specific expectations about our lives, in getting out of the driver's seat, letting the Spirit take the wheel, and going with God's flow. Sometimes that will take us to easy, joyful places...sometimes to hard places. As my old friend said, "sometimes you're crushing the grapes, and sometimes you're drinking the wine." But as people attempting to walk by the Spirit, we can believe that always, God will be with us in it, helping us eventually to forge some sense of good. And in the long run, we'll find that its better to be with God in the hard places than alone and running our own show in the "easy places." That's why the Psalmist said "One day in God's presence is better than a thousand days elsewhere." The Psalmist knew Dr. King's and Paul's secret, too.

Real, deep seated joy comes not in "getting what you want" but in letting go of specific wanting, and learning to want God...learning to want and appreciate what the Spirit has already given you; learning that when you let the Spirit guide your life, all things, even the hardest, will somehow be worked together for good.

The Isrealites had to learn to love manna and quail before they could begin to be ready for the Promised Land. They had to learn that the daily provisions they received from God were sufficient for each day...and, not to hoard extra for tomorrow, but to trust that God would be with them and provide for them tomorrow, when it came. They had to learn to rely on God and to find their peace in God

no matter what the circumstances. And we can assume that once they quit their complaining, quit judging the present as unacceptable, quit resisting where they were, that ironically, it was only then that they realized "hey, this manna and quail actually tastes pretty good! And more to the point, that they developed a taste for the peace that came from relinquishing their tight-fisted attempts to control their own lives, and surrendered to the freedom of letting go. That's "the peace that passes all understanding" that Paul talks about a little bit later in Phillipians. It's the peace that comes from getting out of our heads and thoughts and expectations, and into the deeper place of the Spirit. When we live from that place, we don't have to get all riled up about things, little things, or even, if we are to believe Paul and Dr. King and Jesus, even big things like death. And there's the ticket, because once we have made peace, even partial, uneasy peace with death, then we are free. It has been said that behind all fears, if traced back, painstakingly, to the root, behind all fears lies the fear of death. That's why Paul's statement is so amazing, "to live is Christ, to die is gain. I don't know which to prefer" he says.

May we grow in faith, trusting that God will be with us in any desert, and thereby come to love manna and quail. Bread and meat...the stuff of daily life. That's where we find God, or probably more aptly, where God finds us.

What issue or situation in your life is confounding you right now? What is the thing that you think, if changed, would totally transform your life? I can all but promise you that if it happened, the water of your life would again, eventually, seek its own level, and some sense of normal would return. And while it might be a wonderful thing, you'd be back in the desert eventually, again having to face that source of all fear, death, one way another.

So why not stop the search for the panacea, and to whatever extent you can, make peace with now? And let God use it to continue to the process of spiritual transformation, soul-making, forming you into the fullest and best version of yourself so that you, all along the way, can take your place in the Body of Christ to help find your own peace, and help heal the world.