

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

9/18/11

Celebrating God's Presence

Exodus 16:6

In 1719 the British Earl of March was an 18 year old with a very good reason to complain. He had just been informed that his father had arranged for him to marry a 13 year old girl, the Lady Sarah Cadogan. The reason for the marriage was to cancel a gambling debt between their fathers. The young Earl couldn't believe that his father would subject him to such a humiliating turn of events. He said to his father, "Surely you are not going to marry me off to that dowdy?" But that is exactly what happened. He was brought home from college, married, and immediately sent on a three year grand tour of the European continent. His new wife did not make the trip.

When he returned home from his grand tour, the last thing he wanted to do was to visit the girl he had been forced to marry. So he put off that meeting as long as he could. He decided to go to the theater to put his troubles out of his mind. There he noticed a woman of truly captivating beauty. He began asking people if they knew who this woman was. Finally he spoke to someone who knew. He was stunned to learn that this beauty with whom he was smitten was Lady March, the girl he married three years before. It is said that their marriage was so affectionate that she died of grief only a year after his life ended. The turn of events which led an 18 year old to complain that his life had been ruined turned out to be one of the greatest gifts he would ever receive. It was a surprising source of celebration(International Historical and Genealogical Society Newsletter, September 2010).

This is the dynamic that was at work in the 16th chapter of Exodus. After their escape from the Egyptian army at the Red Sea nothing worked out the way the Israelites expected. When they signed on with Moses, they assumed that they were on the fast track to the promised land. They believed that leaving Egypt would enable them to quickly achieve a higher standard of living. But now they find themselves wandering in a barren wilderness. The promised land seems beyond their reach. They struggle to survive in a place where they can neither hunt for meat nor grow crops. They point out to Moses that they were better off in Egypt. For even in slavery they had the security of knowing that adequate food would be provided.

The people believe that they have good reason to complain. Because Moses is their leader he bears the brunt of their frustration. But Moses understands that the real problem for his people is not their concern about food or anxiety about their future economic prospects. The real problem is that they do not discern or celebrate the presence of God in their lives. So Moses reminds the people that God is at the center of their journey. Their relationship with God is the gift that changes everything. Whatever else may happen God's presence is truly a wonder worth celebrating. The sign of God's presence is the manna which comes to them every day. The flaky substance which congeals on the tamarisk tree every morning is not just a phenomenon of nature. It is God's gift of bread for their journey. It is a daily reminder of God's presence. Moses is trying to help his people understand that the ultimate purpose of their journey is moving from a life of complaining to one of celebrating God's presence.

We see this same contrast at work in the 20th chapter of Matthew. There Jesus tells a parable about a group of workers whose lives do not turn out as they expect. After working all day in the vineyard, they are horrified to discover that their employer has paid them no more than the workers who showed up just before quitting time. A reasonable and fair personnel policy should require prorating the pay checks to reflect the actual hours worked. Any well run business operates that way. They angrily protest the injustice of this treatment. Jesus tells this story to demonstrate that in God's eyes we have all shown up at 5:00 pm. To celebrate God's presence is never about keeping score. It means giving thanks that we are all loved far more than we deserve.

The power which comes from making the journey from complaining to celebrating God's presence can transform a society. Harvard historian Niall Ferguson has written about a conversation he once had with a member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This Chinese scholar had been given the task of sorting out what it was that had given America and the West so much vitality over the past two hundred years. This is what he said:

At first we thought it was your guns. Then we thought it was your political system, democracy. Then we said it was your economic system, capitalism. But for the last 20 years we have known that it was your religion. (Quoted by Johnathan Sacks, The Wall Street Journal, August 20-21, 2011, page C3).

Perhaps we should not be surprised that there are now more Christians in China than there are members of the Communist Party.

Moses would not have been surprised. His message to his people was that the surest way out of the wilderness for individuals and societies is learning to celebrate God's presence. It is never too late to be transformed by that message.