Nu’uanu Congregational Church

July 12, 2020

SIXTEH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

*“From Rephidim to Mount Saini”* Jeannie D. Thompson

## *Exodus 19:2-8a*

*2They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. 3Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 4You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.’*

*7So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. 8The people all answered as one: ‘Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.’ Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.*

Many of the stories of the Bible that we read for ourselves, or have read to us, can elicit from us a whole spectrum of thoughts and feelings. Sometimes we are amazed, sometimes our hearts bend toward feelings of quiet wonder and love. Sometimes the stories of the Bible will break our hearts, and that is not a bad thing either because a heart that is broken may be ready to be put back together in ways that are stronger.

Sometimes a Bible story will even fill us with confusion and questions—and this too is a good thing. To question what we have been given is usually a first step toward greater understanding and deeper faith, a faith that will not be satisfied with easy answers.

The very short passage we heard this morning is sort of like that. It is one of those pieces of Scripture that calls upon us to read a little more, to remember more of the story. And what I hope you will hear and experience as we go along together is yet another thing that God’s words can do for us: they can do all of those things I have already mentioned *and* they can lead us into a greater understanding of who we are—as individuals, *but especially as a community of faith*.

To begin with, the Israelites have been out of Egypt for about three months but in that short time, so much has happened.

First, there was the whole business of packing up and leaving. I can imagine that a lot of them could hardly believe the day had come that they were *finally* being delivered from their slavery and sorrow in Egypt. How amazing it must have been to them that they had experienced and witnessed a complete reversal of fortunes!

Mighty Pharaoh had been brought to his knees with the ten plagues God sent to punish him and prove to him that God was the only real power in the land. When Pharaoh decided to challenge that power even more directly with all the might he could summon, he and all of his warriors, chariots, and war horses were swallowed up in the Red Sea while the Israelites continued on in safety.

God brought about all of these events to free the Israelites, and you would have thought that this would be enough to convince—not only Pharaoh and the Egyptians—but also the *Israelites*—that God was serious, and that God’s love for these people was powerful.

Unfortunately, that is *not* what happened. Once Egypt is behind them, the Israelites almost immediately begin to notice all the things that are different—which is to say: *deficient* about their new living arrangements. At one point, they even begin to wax nostalgic about Egypt.

About a month before this story, they have grown weary of the provisions they had hurriedly brought with them. What was worse was that even these were beginning to get low. Suddenly, their memories of their slavery were memories of having full portions of meat and bread, and the Bible says that they began to murmur against Moses and Aaron, their leaders.

This “murmuring” was more that grumbling. It was more of a toxic mix of grumbling and gossiping. (It is just a good thing that none of them knew that they would be out there together for forty years!)

Happily, God’s patience with these people was deep and faithful. God meets each challenge with amazing compassion and provision. It seems that God understood that so much of the peoples’ bad behavior was grounded in their fear. They were in a new situation that they did not fully understand. In fact, they were probably more used to city dwelling than making their way in the countryside. Their past had not prepared them for a wilderness journey. They did not have the kind of skills and knowledge of the land that was needed for such an undertaking.

God knew this and met them in the wilderness of Shur. Where there was only bitter water, God caused it to turn into sweet, refreshing water and then led them on to the oasis at Elim where there were twelve springs of sweet water.

In the wilderness called Sin, when the people complained about having no meat and bread, God gave them quail and mana—as much as each man, woman and child needed every day.

Finally, at Rephidim, once more the people test God’s word and patience. Once again, water is an issue. Once again, God provides for them.

Right after the water problem is sorted out, the Israelites are attacked by the Amalek. So, Moses sends Joshua and a company of men to meet them as he watched over them from a high hill. As he watches the battle, Moses lifts up his hands to God, and the Israelite warriors are safe. As soon as Moses grows tired and begins to lower his arms, they begin to lose. The problem is solved with brother Aaron and Hur, who stand beside Moses holding his arms aloft until the Amalek army is vanquished.

In three short months, all of this is accomplished—freedom, but more importantly, God’s constant care of the people. In fact, God goes to all sorts of trouble to keep the people safe, fed, and supplied with every good thing. What is even more, when we meet them in the passage we heard this morning, the people have borne witness to all of these mighty deeds on their behalf. Indeed, many of them probably still had the remains of the last feast of quail and mana digesting in their bellies.

After all of this activity, it is time for God and Moses to have a little face-to-face talk. So, Moses is called up to the top of Sinai and God reminds Moses of all that God has done for the people. God even says to Moses, “you have seen what I did to the Egyptians!” [19:4]

All of this is God’s basis for offering the Israelites the covenant of connection and relationship that God wants to have with them. Among all of the peoples of the earth, God has chosen these people to be God’s own, and God has shown what a faithful, worthy, and deeply concerned partner to this covenant God intends to be: God will provide, rescue, keep safe, even lift them *“on eagles’ wings”* to bring them to God’s self.

This is offered to them as evidence of the trust and confidence the people can have in the covenant they are offered, and in the person and intentions of God.

Having experienced all of these mighty deeds, when Moses asks the people if they will accept God’s invitation to be God’s people, they respond with a resounding affirmative. Yes, they want to receive this covenant.

As with all of the passages from the Bible, there is much here to draw our attention, much for us to ponder regarding our own context.

The covenant we have been called into by Christ holds the same power as the ancient Israelites knew, but even more than they, we have been called into bonds of love that are even stronger than all of the heated activity of the battles and passions of the long journey to the Promised Land. What is more, we too, are also being asked if we are as serious about fulfilling our part of the covenant as God is about fulfilling God’s part.

Like the Israelites, we too, have said “yes”—Nu’uanu Congregational Church has said “yes” to God when asked if we will be God’s beloved people.

What is more, our affirmation has been more than a “yes” to all that God has done for us. We have professed to believe that our covenant with God means that we are to love others as God has loved us! We have accepted our responsibility and have held up to God our desire to become a church on a mission, *God’s* mission in the world. *We have actually put it in down on paper in black and white!*

I do not know if the ancient Israelites understood the responsibility they were taking on. I have to believe that Moses was at least as good a pastor as I am, so I’m going to say, “yes” they did know.

As your pastor, I want us to know that, too. This is our Sinai. The last three months have been our Rephidim. Indeed, it has been our *latest* Rephidim. We have been tested in new ways. We have been in danger of loosing one another. We have had to put aside some of our most cherished traditions in worship like singing, but we have not lost music. Jieun, whom we love, is still with us today and next Sunday, and she has helped us find a new organist who will start on July 26th.

We have also continued to build on the work and prayer that has already been done during these past few years. So, we have continued to ponder, pray, and work on discerning what the mission of our church is going to be.

Thanks be to God that through all that has been happening, we have been offered and inspired to try new things…and we have tried them. We have held fast to the love God created among us, and we have flourished. We have believed in God’s love for us…and new gifts have been given to us in so many ways.

What God showed to the Israelites through the wilderness that was Rephidim, God has shown us, too. Indeed, our Rephidim started in a cradle in Bethlehem, was threatened and feared lost at Calvary, was gloriously resurrected on Easter morning, and abides with us still through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

There will be more trials ahead, as there were for the Israelites, but we will meet them together, strengthened by God’s love and caring for us, and God’s joy when we are strong and faithful enough to turn and offer God’s love, in God’s name, to God’s beloved.

Let us pray this will continue to be so. Amen.