

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 18<sup>th</sup>. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B  
Exodus 16: 2-4, 12-15 Psalm 78 Ephesians 4: 17, 20-24 John 6: 24-35

Dear Preachers:

If you have ever wanted to try focusing your preaching on the Hebrew Scriptures, here is your chance. The episode today from Exodus is part of the desert/wilderness journey. It's symbolism is rich preaching fare—a faith community's arduous journey over a long period of time through harsh terrain. Sounds very modern to me! In the Exodus reading, God has led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery and now we find them in the midst of their trek through the desert. They have gotten free, but the journey isn't over yet. They have much to face and learn about themselves and God on the way to their promised land. The narrative is powerful and parallels our own faith experience.

However, notice the references to “the whole Israelite community” in this reading. Such references to the people as a community are found throughout the entire desert narrative, from the very beginning moments when God first leads the people out of Egypt. The whole community leaves together and the whole community is fed, afflicted, led, tested, and grumbles. So, while the reading may suggest to the preacher the personal struggles we go through on our individual faith journeys, remember this is a community faith story, the whole community is being addressed. We are encouraged to reflect on the trials and sufferings that threaten the very life and identity of our own faith community as we travel together.

Let's begin by looking at the desert experience from a grammatical point of view, and I know this is strange, but bear with me. In a simple declarative sentence, we have a subject, verb and object. The subject does the action, the verb identifies the action and the object of the sentence receives the action. Throughout this Exodus experience one thing is very clear--- God is the subject of the sentence. God does the significant actions in the story. God is the one who sees the affliction of the people in slavery and God decides to come to their rescue. God notices, rescues, leads, protects, feeds, speaks, etc. God even hears “the grumbling of the Israelites” and decides to respond on their behalf. (In a way, their grumbling is like a prayer, or maybe a lament. God is never far from the people and so hears their constant complaints.) Back to our grammar lesson: the people, on the other hand, are the “objects of the sentence.” They are in need, can do nothing for themselves. They are the recipients of God's gracious acts.

The Exodus reveals who God is to these people and to us. The struggles of the wilderness also reveal who we are; we are often weak, wavering, grumbling and in need of a faithful God who takes the initiative towards us. And more, we need a God who notices that we are in slavery, even when we are so used to our condition and do not even have the desire to make the effort to get free. God has begun the process; the people have been led out. But that is only their first step towards freedom; they have a long and arduous journey ahead of them. During the journey God will teach them who God is for them and will form them into a community of God's people.

They are undergoing trials in the desert. Trials are more profound than daily temptations. Trials threaten our very existence and our identity as a people of God. Trials make us want to give up, turn around and go back to the old slavery. As they travel to freedom, the people are meeting resistance---daily, strong forces that would overpower them. Breaking habits, addictions and debilitating ways of living is very difficult and in the midst of the process, there is a temptation to go back. Our church underwent a profound change after Vatican II---granted there were many false starts and sometimes rapid change from accustomed ways. It has been a painful and often journey filled with conflict. There are people who still want to undo the work of the council and return us to a church where decisions were made for us and we were an isolated and barricaded island community in the world.

I would be careful not to paint God as the One who sends the trials or the tests on our journey. Remember, the Israelites had been slaves: what God is doing is leading them to freedom. If they face hardships it is in the process of getting free and leaving the old ways behind. The desert will be arduous for them; life tests us in many ways. During difficult times we learn where our heart and affections lie; the testing happens as we struggle to leave behind what is false and commit ourselves to what will bring growth. We die in many ways along the way as a new people are brought to birth.

Like the Israelites, the church faces trials from hostile forces both outside and within. I saw a list last year of all the countries where Christians are persecuted, the list was large--- over 20 countries. I am sure there are at least as many countries on that list today, probably more. But there are internal struggles as well in the community. The church, in its attempts to live as a witness to Christ in the world, finds itself adopting the values of the countries in which it is located. We begin to

identify Christianity with the political and economic way of life of our nation. We are tempted to think being a good citizen and always supporting our national interests are the same as being a good Christian. In addition, the trials our church has faced these past few years, because of the clergy sex scandals, have also weakened our pilgrim community from within. One result of the scandals is to distract us from the pressing needs in our world that we should be addressing with our energies, finances and programs. The scandals have stirred up "grumblings" from all sides; words of pain, anger, accusations, rejection, etc. In this new, most arduous desert experience, we once again need the food that only God can provide God's people in the desert—the "daily bread" of healing, renewal and recommitment. We are on a long journey, the trials come in various forms and as a people, we easily lose our way.

We notice and feel hope because God sees the hungers of the Exodus community and sends them food. But it is not the food to which they have been accustomed, nor the kind of food they might have chosen for themselves. They ask, "What is this?" The reading encourages us to believe that God is feeding us during this present difficult journey, but it is not the way we expected to be fed. Indeed, we might not even recognize the food we are being given. In difficult times, we find strength to get through each day in the form of people who are there to support us and give us guidance for important decisions. This kind of help comes in such ordinary packages that we fail to see the hand of God in it. So, in the community, food may come in the form of prophetic voices who, though irritating at times, call us back to be the church---the sacrament of Christ in the world.

Exodus reminds us that there is enough bread for "each day." The people must gather a "daily portion." If they try to gather more than that (except when they are preparing for the next day's sabbath) the food will rot. Each day God will be there to get us through. We are being taught in the desert to trust that daily nurturing. We have learned and confess that what we really need, that which will mean our survival as a person of faith and as a community of God's people, can only be supplied by God. We celebrate the gift of "daily bread" in this Eucharist. Of course, even as we ask for daily bread for our community of believers, we believe that God has already heard us. What is the "daily bread" we need to continue to be a strong witnessing community? What will enable us to know that God is caring for us and will hold us together as a people witnessing to God's presence in the world? We will ask for that bread; but don't be surprised if the "manna" we get comes in surprising packaging.

## ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

John C. Endres and Elizabeth Liebert, *A Retreat with the Psalms: Resources for Personal and Communal Prayer*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001. Paper, ISBN 0-8091-4026-8, 254 pages.

The book is designed to open up the psalms for deeper personal and communal prayer. It is a very helpful guide for the preacher's preparation of retreats or days of prayer based on the psalms. Besides excellent reflections on selected psalms and an overview of the psalms according to their types, there are also suggestions for communal prayer and ritual services.

### QUOTABLE

Our lives are filled with ordinary tasks: eating a meal, washing the dishes, pulling weeds, dusting, washing your hands. But more attention-consuming tasks also fill our days: creating new products, caring for small children or elderly parents, completing a degree, paying bills, figuring taxes, running a household, teaching a classroom full of squirming children, clerking at a store, managing a small business, participating in volunteer organizations, ministering to a congregations, nursing the sick.. Reflect on a typical day. What aspects of life become holy here? Is anyone present whom I usually overlook? How does the spirit lead me in my everyday life?

—from, *A Retreat with the Psalms: Resources for Personal and Communal Prayer*, page 178.

### JUSTICE NOTES

#### How Parishes Can Encourage a Preferential Love of the Poor

- Use the bulletin regularly to keep parishioners informed of the parish's outreach ministry. This supports the efforts of those involved and encourages others to join.
- Explore the possibility of establishing a "sister parish" within your diocese or in a Third World country.
- Find ways to involve a wide range of parish members. Some will serve as leaders; some with specific activities. Homebound people may commit to pray for individuals in need. Parents could take children to visit a nursing home. The aim is to have the parish's outreach effort be a ministry of the entire parish.
- Join a legislative network that acts on public policy issues. Organize a meeting between members of your parish and your local elected officials to discuss key public policy issues affecting the poor and the vulnerable.

(U.S. Catholic bishops, "Communities of Salt and Light." Quoted in, "The Catholic Wisdom", series by Claretian Publications.)

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Jamie Smith #0376917 (On death row since 5/10/96)

- Robbie D. Locklear #0246186 (5/14/96)
- Anthony J. Hipps #0185502 (5/22/96)
- Archie Billings #0471315 (6/5/96)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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