

17TH Sunday after Pentecost
October 1, 2017
Exodus 17:1-7
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Trinity Church has a most unique “God gallery”. What’s a “God gallery” you’re wondering. Well part of it is the art here in our stained glass windows and on our walls - in the icons, crucifix, and stations of the cross. That’s the “fixed” part of the God gallery. The other part of the God gallery is – well, just look at the people sitting around you. We are the other part of the “God gallery”, the living part of the gallery that reflects God’s goodness and love to others. Our artwork and our lives make a statement of what we believe about God.

From what I understand about part of Trinity’s history, that large window in the rear of the church was originally in the front of the church. I’ve been told that due to its size, when the sun shone in the morning, the brightness nearly blinded people so that it was difficult to see the action of the liturgy during the service. So at some point, it was moved to the rear of the church.

Take some time when you have an opportunity to study this window. It depicts today’s Old Testament reading, the story of Moses and the people of Israel – in the beginning stage of their maiden voyage into freedom and new life. Their journey winds and wends its way through the Desert of Shur.

It doesn’t take long to realize that the honeymoon of deliverance from slavery in Egypt is over. It’s been three days and the people are parched and need water. They come to a place called Marah, and find the water there is bitter and undrinkable. They complain to Moses, “What are we to drink?” Moses cries out to God who shows him a piece of wood that Moses throws into the water, and the water turns sweet and fresh enough to slake their parched throats. Traveling beyond Marah they make their way to Elim, where they find twelve springs, if you can imagine it, and seventy palm trees. Not surprisingly, they camp there for some time because you just don’t stumble upon an oasis in the desert very often.

The company moves on into the Desert of Sin, between Elim and Sinai. It’s now been about a month and a half since they left Egypt. The whole company grumbles to Moses and Aaron. “Why didn’t God let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat? You’ve brought us out into this wilderness to starve us to death, the whole company of Israel!” In response, God sends quail in the evening for them to eat, and in the morning, after the dew has dried they find bread from heaven, manna, which they are instructed to gather each day, enough for everyone. Again God has heard their complaining and has faithfully provided what they need.

The company of Israel moves forward and stops to camp at a place called Rephidim. But there is no water here at all and for the third time the people take Moses to task. "Give us water to drink, Moses! Why did you take us from Egypt and drag us out here with our children and animals to die of thirst?"

The difficulty of the journey is eroding the people's trust. Hostility has replaced belief and Moses fears for his life. He is not in an enviable position out in the wilderness, stuck between the Almighty and a people quickly losing patience with repeated deprivation, and with leaders who seem to keep taking them from one desperate situation to the next. But Moses didn't ask for this job! He cries out to God, "What can I do with these people? Any minute now they'll kill me!" God gives Moses instructions to go on ahead of the people, and take some elders with him. He is also to take the staff with which he struck the Nile. When he comes to the rock at Horeb, God will be there. Moses is to strike the rock with the staff. Water will gush out of it and the people will drink." Moses did what God said, and the elders were right there watching.

Moses names the place Massah (Testing Place) and Meribah (Quarreling) because of the Israelites quarreling and testing God when they said, "Is God among us, or not?" Before when I've read this text, I've thought – perhaps somewhat uncharitably - what whiney people the children of Israel seemed to be. And God just seems to have endless patience with them, does not seem to get upset by their doubting and anxiousness, is not put off by their questioning and complaining.

There are a few interesting details to notice in the stained glass window in the back depicting this scene. Moses in the center, stands before the rock with his staff. There are others gathered among the company of Israelites. In the bottom left there is an older man, semi-reclining. He looks utterly exhausted, his head hanging down, chin to chest. Have you ever known that kind of total exhaustion? Dry and parched, weak, maybe even confused from lack of water. The man is being offered a cup. On the right there is a young woman holding a child. There are two other people who become the focal point in the center, a man and woman side by side, their faces upturned toward the water gushing forth. The woman is holding up a jar to fill with water pouring from the rock. There is the slightest hint of a smile on her face. The man's expression looks to be relief, as if to say, "Ah, finally, God has come through and provided for us".

As I studied the scene in the window earlier this week, I found myself wondering several things. First off, what does it suggest about the past members of Trinity who either chose or agreed to have this scene from Exodus depicted and displayed prominently in this church? And what might it say about the artist who crafted it?

It's probably safe to assume that both the artist and those past members of Trinity believed that God did indeed provide for the Israelites. The Hebrew text does not say whether or not water actually came from the rock when Moses struck it. I've been trying to imagine what it would have been like to look at this window in front of the church every Sunday you came to worship, to be reminded that God provides, and we don't always understand how. This story is so fitting to represent us – a faith

community together journeying with God, forever learning lessons in trusting God to provide what we need.

The Israelites are thought to have been enslaved in Egypt for about four hundred years. They understood well enough the ways of Pharaoh. They knew they were there to work as slaves until they died. After awhile, the powerlessness and learned helplessness seem normal. But this Yahweh, this God who has called them out of slavery to walk in freedom toward a promised land – this generation does not have a history or experience with this saving God. They don't know this God and God's ways. What does it mean that this God intends to bring them life and not death? Out of Egypt, in and through the wilderness, God will find ways to make life flow in unexpected ways. But it will require of the Israelites a certain amount of trust, a willingness to put their faith in a God who seems not to do things in the typical way. And why has God chosen them to fashion as a new people?

The journey we are on, friends, is a continuation of that same journey into new life and freedom. God is about fashioning us into new people, individually and as a faith community in this place.

We begin today a month long celebration of God's abundance which we're calling "Journey to Generosity". All throughout our lives we will continue learning lessons about trusting God more fully. We are no different than the people of Israel who could be stubborn, hard-hearted and generally lacking in faith. God asks us, just like God asked the Israelites to trust when the good provision we need doesn't come as quickly or in quite the form as we would like. We are the people called to grow in our relationship with God so that we reflect more clearly the love, compassion, and awesome generosity of God.

So let me mention a few particular people who, along with us, represent that living part of God's Gallery. I am still amazed when I consider that Trinity has received four very generous gifts in the past year. Two have come from people many of us never met – Helen Mahon and Bruce and Frances Kilmer. Combined, their gifts total over \$200,000. While they are now deceased, they are very much a part of the communion of saints and all the company of heaven, sharing larger life with our Lord. The other two gifts in the past year include the painting of the exterior of the parish hall and the interior of this church given by the Gabler family, and the Allen organ gifted to Trinity by Charles Farris.

All the donors of these gifts experienced God's grace, abundance, and generosity in the life of this faith community. When we speak of stewardship, we are not speaking only about our money, our treasure. Stewardship involves all of who we are – our time, our talents and skills. Stewardship is about God's "over the top-ness" in giving so much that anything we give away leaves us with even more.

In the coming weeks and months, we are invited to listen, learn, and give thanks for the many ways we experience God's generosity. Let us engage this time wholeheartedly

and with joy. It is the Spirit's invitation for all of us to be transformed into believers who appreciate and extend God's abundance and generosity *all the time*. We too, friends, are living members of God's gallery, pointing to God's goodness and grace. Amen.