Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly

Morning Reflection – Bishop Deborah Hutterer

It is good to be here with you this morning.

Just a personal note as we begin. The GCS and RMS have a special relationship. I am grateful to have served alongside of Bishop Gonia these past 6 years.

There are many ways our two synods have shared ministry. Two examples are the Lilly Grant and the Director of congregation transitions. That position is half time, and the GCS has 1/3 of the ½ time! Deacon Katie Klein currently balances the two synods. I’m grateful for the ways we’ve collaborated and witness to what it is to be “church together” and “church becoming.”

Each bishop was asked to lead a session at this assembly. As I thought about this assembly and what is it to be on the way together, I was drawn to the book of Exodus focusing on the Israelites journey in the wilderness.

For these next moments, let’s explore on our way together in the wilderness and community, leadership, and God’s provision and steadfast love.

**On our Way Together in the Wilderness and community**

We can estimate that there was roughly 350-400 years between Joseph's death and the beginning of Moses' leadership that launched the Exodus from Egypt. For 9 and 10 generations, many did not know the covenant promises of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Lots of faith formation to be done!

Moses was called by God to lead, and God also provided Moses with his brother, Aaron as a partner. God’s mission was to send Moses to Pharoah to with the plea to let the people go. There are plagues--each to show the power of God to the Egyptians, but more, to show God’s power to the Israelites.

In the final plague, death of the first-born sons in the land, Pharoah relents and lets the Hebrew people leave.

After the Israelites miraculously crossed the Red Sea it soon became clear they had left all they had ever known in Egypt.

Entering the wilderness forced the people to completely rely on God, which was not easy. As we know from the Scripture stories and psalms written, the wilderness, in hindsight, became their spiritual touchstone of God’s faithfulness for generations.

In didn’t take long for the people to become anxious and fearful. Not so different from us.

When facing anxiety and fear, humans often exhibit behaviors such as:

Complaining/Grumbling

One of the major themes of this story is how the Israelites frequently complained and grumbled against Moses and God when faced with the hardships and uncertainties of the wilderness journey. Likewise, when we are anxious about changes or an unclear future, some people, *not you*, but ***some people*** can be prone to excessive complaining or grumbling.

Grumbling and complaining can turn to criticizing leadership.

The Israelites directly questioned Moses' leadership and the decision to leave Egypt. They held him accountable. How often when we are anxious about the future we can be quick to criticize the decisions and vision of leader.

When the way is uncertain, can grumble, complain, criticize and long for the familiar.

The Israelites longed to return to life in Egypt, even though it involved slavery and oppression.

Fear of the unknown can lead to an anxious desire to cling to the familiar rather than embrace needed changes. It’s good to celebrate the past, but our memories aren’t so reliable about the good ‘ol days. When we are honest it probably wasn’t as problem free and wonderful as we remember. When we cling to, or worship the past, we lose sight of the new life God calls us into.

I know we are not in the literal wilderness, but we are in times where it can feel like it. Answers are not clear. That includes institutions, like the church. The wilderness is uncomfortable. Wilderness times can teach us if we stay in community and wrestle with the hard questions. We trust God to show us the way. And, remember, the wilderness times lead us into new life and ways of being.

**On our way together, leadership**

Moses is called by God to lead this great multitude. From the movie version of this story, we might have a guess that there were thousands of people. However, estimates from the book of Numbers, there were 1.2 million people.

Moses faced not just the harsh physical conditions of the wilderness, he also faced the monumental challenge of leading a large and divided and discontented people. To keep their focus on God, God’s provision for them and a new future that was being prepared. It’s a big job.

Our church and societal institutions face similar wildernesses—a metaphorical expanse filled with uncertainty and challenge. Our journey is fraught with ambiguity, and like Moses and Aaron, our leaders and their supporters are called to face the challenges with wisdom and grace, seeking God’s guidance along the way.

You know this is not easy. When the way is not clear, we want leaders to show us the way. This is a daunting task.

Robert Greenleaf said, “The leader needs to have a *sense of the unknowable* and be able the *foresee the unforeseeable*. The only way to do this is to draw on spiritual resources.

Moses spent a lot of time with God. He had 40 years to practice drawing on spiritual resources.

Today, our church faces challenges:

dwindling congregations, societal indifference to church institutions, and internal conflicts within our communities. These realities were named by Bishop Gonia in his sermon.

We want easy answers, or better yet, a hero to show the way. This story reminds us that God loves God’s people and, rather than heroes, God works through fallible human beings who believe that the Holy Spirit is our GPS.

Leadership is about listening to God, listening to others, fostering community spirit, and casting a vision.

**On our Way Together, with God**

We live in times where the word “unprecedented” is overused. It is used so often as to become meaningless. I believe we’ll continue to see one unprecedented event after another as we move forward as church together.

Scripture continues to remind us of God’s faithfulness. Whether we are wandering the wilderness, or bumping around for a shorter amount of time, as people named, claimed, loved and sent by God to live in this world and this time, we trust God is leading, guiding and providing.

*In Exodus 16:4,* we are told of God’s provision for the people: “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.” God provided manna every day for 40 years until they entered the Promised Land.

God gives us enough for this day. Every day.

Each day for the Israelites was also unprecedented. On each morning, they collected the manna, their faith was renewed, reminding them that no matter the uncertainties that lay ahead, they were not alone.

Today, in our own “unprecedented” daily challenges, this old story holds many lessons for us as God’s people, On the Way Together. Together is important because we need to remind each other of God’s promises. Remembering and reminding each other is essential for our way to help us focus on the present, rather than being consumed by anxiety for the future. We can wonder where God is leading us.

Trust God is in our midst. This is God’s church. The Holy Spirit is stirring in this place as you listen for who God is calling to be your next leader. And, as important, God is preparing you to accompany the new bishop as you are on the way together.