

Commentary on Exodus 15-17.7

Road trips: they bring out the best and they bring out the worst in us.

For starters, I tend to enjoy the occasional road trip. Pack the car to the gills and head to a scenic campground, two and a half hours away? Yes, please. Drive twelve hours north, from California to Oregon, to visit the grandparents for spring break? I can't get enough of audio books, McDonald's drive-thru lines, and salty snacks galore.

But if I'm driving and you're sitting in the passenger seat, you'd better know how I like to receive directions. You'd better know that our ultimate survival depends on you understanding and honoring the way I like to receive directions (or so a therapist once told my husband and me in a premarital counseling session).

If you will not let Siri's voice and screen guide me in my driving endeavors, there will be problems.

All sarcasm aside, after the dramatic defeat of Pharaoh's army, the Israelites enter the second stage of their wilderness journey. And just as road trips bring out the best and worst in us humans, Moses learns the same about the Israelites, while journeying through the wilderness with them.

First, though, this week's reading begins with song:

*Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendor, doing wonders?
You stretched out your right hand,
the earth swallowed them (15:11-12).*

Moses, and later, the prophetess Miriam, sing and dance and play tambourines to songs that recount the goodness and majesty of God, that retell a tale of defeat against the Egyptian army. In this spirit of ultimate celebration, the journey begins—only to discover, after three days of travel, that water is nowhere to be found.

The people of God grumble, as we are wont to do when thirst overwhelms us. When Moses finally cries out to God, God shows him a piece of wood that, when thrown into the water, transforms the water from bitter to sweet. Although the message is

nothing new, God reminds the people to listen and to do right, for “I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you” (15:26).

God lays it out, plain and simple. Long journeys bring out the best and the worst in us, though, no matter the situation.

We see this on road trips, but we also see this in extended periods of mask mandates, stay-at-home orders, and isolation guidelines. We experience this when mental illness overwhelms our loved ones, or when a cancer diagnosis changes the trajectory of a life in a matter of minutes.

Perhaps, when we think about the Israelites’ journey through this lens, our empathy grows. Our ability to understand expands more than it did at first, which is good, because by the time we get to chapter 16, nothing but grumbling and complaining seems to be coming out of their mouths.

We’re hungry! We’re starving! If only God would have let us die in Egypt! There, “we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (16:3).

Although exclamative complaints continue, God responds with provision by continuing to be the God who hears, sees, and acts. “God is thus portrayed as a God who *hears* the complaints of the people ... God is a God who *sees* that the people are hungry, and most importantly, God is a God who *acts* to give the hungry Israelites whatever they need,” writes theologian [Juliana Claassens](#).

Manna, or bread, rains down from heaven, and each day’s supply is just enough—no more, no less—than exactly what each person and their neighbor needs for sustenance. Many [commentators point out](#) that this test was not as much about following an instruction manual, as much as it was about trusting that the “heavenly bread will also be the daily bread.” After all, “hoarding is a sign of distrust, because it demonstrates a refusal to believe that [God] is worthy of trust.”

Be this the case, as theologian Michael J. Chan surmises, their grumbling was actually a symptom of a lack of trust in God.

Personally, I can’t help but think about my father-in-law, [James Meredith](#). In 1966, he set out on a single man’s walk through the states of Tennessee and Mississippi, in

an effort to encourage the African American vote. Although the month-long walk turned into something bigger than he ever intended (later becoming what historians call the last greatest protest of the civil rights movement), he began the walk with less than ten dollars in his pocket, believing the good people of those two states would care for his needs.

His people would feed him and they would provide a place for shelter. They would protect him and they would accompany him, if the need arose. He trusted that the Black community would rally around him, as he rallied for them and their right to vote.

Even though he then went through a wilderness experience all his own (when he was shot by a white supremacist on the second day of the march), I think we can say that he never actually traveled alone.

Likewise, in these chapters, we are reminded that “Israel does not travel alone, and neither do we. The God of the desert is a gift-giving, life-sustaining, and prayer-hearing God. But in the wilderness, the most difficult test is to believe that these claims are true.”

Just as it was true for the Israelites and for my father-in-law as well, I don't doubt it's true for each one of us too.

Whatever your journey, and perhaps, your wilderness, may you be reminded that you do not travel alone, but are instead, heard, seen and acted upon by the God who calls you Beloved.