

Before I begin my sermon this morning, I want to share a quick story from our congregation. One of our members was recently at the hospitable, visiting her elderly father. While there, her father shared a recent, vivid, dream he'd had.

In his dream, he had been kidnapped and brought into a very dark cave; he was completely bound and unable to move. As his dream continued, one of his friends appeared in the cave, holding up an object that was giving off a 'tiny light,' or a 'little flame.' In the dream, her father wanted to move but don't have the strength to do so; he felt desperate and unsure of how he was going to get out of the dark cave,

As soon as her father mentioned a dark cave and a friend holding a light, the woman from our church thought about Jesus—the light of the world. Jesus once said, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*¹ After thinking about Jesus, she remembered that we too have been called to be bright shining lights, pointing people's attention to Jesus Christ.

In that moment, she thought to herself, *"My aging father has not yet professed faith in Christ, and what had I to lose?"* And the two of them began to talk about Jesus, about light, life, and death. The conversation didn't end with a profession of faith, but she sensed God's presence as she spoke with her dad.

When I heard this story I thought to myself, *"That's the vision! A vision of Jesus—the light of the world, leading to a vision for people—that all might know Him, and a willingness to put feet to our faith in every day, normal, interactions."* When I heard this story I was encouraged, and I trust you will be encouraged too—next time it might be you, or me, or all of us. Let's continue to trust Jesus for opportunities to be faithful.

If you have your Bible or smart phone with you this morning, I'd encourage you to turn with me to our text this morning—Exodus 15:22-17:7. If you are using the Blue Bible from the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 57.

This morning's text contains three stories that are connected to each other by way of time and theme. These three stories take place during the 8 week journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai. Last week we looked at the parting of the Red Sea—God rescued Israel from Pharaoh.

After crossing the Sea on dry land, Moses and Miriam led the nation in a song of praise, *"Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? You stretch out your right hand, and the earth swallows your enemies. In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling."*²

¹ John 8:12.

² Exodus 15:11-13.

Three days later Israel was singing a very different tune, accusing Moses and God of sinister neglect. Trust, Suspicion, and Provision—these themes mark the stories for this morning’s sermon.

We are invited to entrust ourselves to the goodness of God, to rely on His provision, and to see our lives in relation to the grand story He is writing. Christian faith is confidence in **Who** we know, not in what we know, see, or control. When our gaze wanders from Christ, to the storm raging around us—to the myriad of needs we have at any given moment—we not only lose sight of Jesus, we lose the plot line of the story. A single minded attention to our pain or our needs, never fails to breed suspicion—*if God is so good, why is this happening to me?*

As a way of entering into Israel’s story, I want to begin by telling you a part of my own.

illus: Before I ever considered pastoral ministry, I had my heart set on medicine. I spent a year at Kwanten College in Sciences, then took a year off to work, and during that time I was accepted at UBC. It was during that year of work, that I began to pray differently.

Many years before, I had become a Christian—I asked Jesus to forgive my sin and lead my life. In the years that followed, I continued to know Jesus as a forgiving and gracious God—there was much for Him to forgive—but to be honest, I never gave Him much room to actually lead my life.

I had plans of my own that I wanted Jesus to bless—a few years at UBC, then Med School, get married, buy a house, have a couple of kids; it was a good plan, it just wasn’t His plan, but I didn’t know that then. It was during that year of work, that I began to pray

differently—I don’t know how it happened, but I remember inviting Jesus to be the Lord and Leader of my life.

It wasn’t long after that I began to second-guess my decision to attend UBC; actually, it was more than second-guessing, I began to have serious doubts. I had no peace about going, and the more I prayed the more I sensed that God had other plans. March, April, May rolled around, September was fast approaching but every prayer for direction was met by the silence of heaven.

One day I had had enough, my frustration boiled over and I thumbed my nose at God. *“If you’re not going to tell me Your plan, then I’m going to go with my plan.”* As far as I was concerned, that was the end of it; after all, wasn’t it my life? Less than month later, I met with a trusted friend and mentor and that encounter unlocked God’s plan and purpose for me. I never did make it to UBC; a few weeks later I packed up my car and drove to Bible College in Regina, Saskatchewan.

I learned an important lesson that night—about the Lord’s trustworthiness, His provision, and about my impatience with His timing. Unfortunately, I didn’t learn my lesson that night; I had a long way to go—I still do.

The next three years of Bible School were filled with discoveries about God, the Scriptures, the Church; at the same time there was tremendous self-discovery. While I was encountering a gracious, loving, and faithful God, I was discovering my own addiction to control. I wanted to run my life but God regularly, inconveniently, put Himself in the way. As soon as the dream of Med School died, I began badgering God to reveal the next step—should I become a

youth pastor, a missionary, or pursue a Masters Degree? The Lord wouldn't give me the clarity I asked for, instead, I regularly sensed the Lord saying, *"Mark, you don't need to know yet"*.

I was content to wait for a time, and I did. Because I didn't want to run ahead of the Lord, I did things a little differently than many of my friends during our graduation year. I didn't go through the licensing process and I didn't apply to grad school; I even bought God a little more time, by coming up with a plan to travel Europe with a friend following graduation.

But when that friend changed his plans, I was suddenly with a plan. I began to pray with more fervour, asking God to direct my path, and once again I was met with silence. Before long my prayers for direction became prayers of accusation—*God I'm doing my part, why aren't You doing Yours? I've been waiting, I've been listening and You haven't given me any direction. In a few months, I have to move and I don't know where? Why aren't You answering me?*

One afternoon I came back from a soccer practice and I was overcome with worry—I dropped to my knees, buried my head on my mattress and cried out to the Lord. In that moment I had lost sight of Jesus and the plot line of the grand story. My world had become very small. I was consumed with what I thought I needed to know about the future and this single-mindedness bred suspicion in my heart—*if God is so good, why am I still waiting?*

I learned something that day, God is faithful even when I am not; His provision came at the height of my suspicion. God interrupted my prayer with the following thought, *"Mark, don't be afraid, I am preparing something for you and it's just around the corner."* Less

than a week later, I accepted a job offer that brought me to Calgary, connected me to a church that poured its life into me, introduced me to mentors, who introduced me to my future wife (who attended North Shore Alliance), and set me upon a path that led me to this church.

Faith, suspicion, and provision—this is my story, it was Israel's story, and it might be your story too. Perhaps you are in need of learning, or relearning, who God really is; I trust that God's word with both encourage and challenge you today.

While there are common themes in each of the three Exodus stories, I want to look at them one by one, beginning with Exodus 15:22-27.

"Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. 23 When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter...24 So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?"

25 Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink. There the Lord issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test. 26 He said, "If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you." 27 Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water."

Three days after God parted the Red Sea and defeated Pharaoh's army, Israel faced her first desert test when they ran out of water. Would they demonstrate trust or suspicion? Would God provide?

If you've ever been in a desert before, not the semi-arid Okanagon, but a true desert, then you know that in the desert, water = life. When they finally found water, it was too bitter to stomach and the people began to grumble against Moses—*it's your fault, you should be doing more for us, we deserve better than this*".

Before Moses even cried out, God had a desert-ready solution that would make the water sweet. The people's complaint didn't lead to judgement, God's patience is on display through His provision. We're also meant to notice what God reveals about Himself in vs. 26: *I am the Lord who heals you*. Not only is God patient and merciful, He is capable of meeting our needs.

In Exodus 16, once again, the Israelites put God to the test. *"The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. 2 In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."*

Two months earlier, Israel was groaning under oppression but here they make slavery in Egypt sound like an all-you-can-eat buffet. And more, they questioned God's motives in rescuing them—they accuse Moses and God of leading them out to the desert to die. It's a

surprising accusation, but equally surprising is God's response—there's not a hint of hurt feelings in God, and no mention of punishment, instead, God pours out mercy.

Vs. 4, *"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. 5 On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.'"*

Five days a week they were to gather enough bread for their daily needs; each new day would bring fresh provision from God. On the sixth day they were to gather twice as much, because the seventh day would be a day of rest, a sabbath. God promised to provide enough on the sixth day that He, and they, could rest from their labour. The test was inherent in the instructions—gather enough food for today, but no more, trusting that God will provide for tomorrow tomorrow.

Vs. 20 tells us that some of the people ignored God's instructions, they took more than they needed, stockpiling for tomorrow, but they awoke to find the manna filled with maggots. Some had a really hard time trusting God, I'm sure they wanted to, but after a life time of slavery, they lived with a poverty mentality. *I don't know what tomorrow holds so I'm going to grab as much as I can and hold onto to it as long as I can.*

You don't have to be poor to live with a poverty mentality; some of the most generous people I know are people who have very little. **What do you think about when you think about God?** Do you find yourself, like these Israelites, putting God to the test?

One author writes, “ ‘Testing’ God involves putting him on probation, withholding trust pending evidence. For the Israelites it meant doubting whether he who had proved sufficient in the past was still sufficient, now that things had taken a different turn... There is also an element of challenge to God, demanding that he prove his worth all over again: if, against all probabilities, he gets us out of this mess, then we will consider believing, but in the meantime we will suspend both faith and obedience.”³

That quotation cuts like a knife—how often do I withhold trust and obedience pending evidence? *I will trust God if He does what I ask. I will trust God if He does what I would do if I were in His position.* I have tested God more times than I can count, and yet, I have found Him to be patient with me in my fear, in my stockpiling, plea-bargaining, and addiction to control.

My accusations, doubts, and demands have been met again and again with evidence that God is faithful even when I am not; He has been merciful to me. He has not given all that I’ve asked for, He has not spared me, or those I love, from difficulty and pain, but in the darkest moments of my life, He has been present, faithful, and kind. God has not met all of my demands, but He has never failed my test.

When we are tested, it’s a different matter altogether. Every test I fail can be linked to a lie I’ve believed about God. *I’ve got enough manna for today, but how can I be sure that God will supply enough for tomorrow?* We hedge our bets, stockpile for tomorrow, just in case God falls short. We believe without believing, trust without

trusting, depend without ever really depending on Him. It’s no wonder we rarely find peace.

As Exodus 16 concludes, God commanded Moses to take an omer of manna and keep it for the generations to come—it was to be a visual reminder of God’s faithful provision. Perhaps we need to do something similar. *What has God done for you, for us, that we dare not forget? What past provision do you need to rehearse so that you face today, faithfully clinging to God?*

Our final story is found in Exodus 17:1-7; once again Israel’s thirst drove them to accusation. Vs. 1, “*They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 So they quarrelled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses replied, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?’ 3 But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?’*”

The Lord said to Moses, vs. 6, “*I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.*” *So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 And he called the place Massah [testing] and Meribah [quarrelling] because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”*

Is the Lord among us or not? Because if He was, I wouldn’t be in this mess—life would be easier, I wouldn’t be single, I wouldn’t be jobless, I wouldn’t have cancer, I wouldn’t be bullied, I wouldn’t be

³ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 182.

divorced, and my loved one would still be alive. Difficulty and pain spawns a swarm of “why” questions—*Why me? Why them? Why now?* And it’s only a hop, skip, and a jump to related questions—*Where did I go wrong? Did I bring this on myself?* There are at least two constants in life—our questions and God’s faithful Presence. God responds to their question—their accusation—by providing them with water. Israel’s lack of faith didn’t stop God from being faithful.

The lesson from the desert is not to stop complaining, be more thankful, and count our blessings—all of this may be necessary, but there is more for us than that. The desert tested Israel’s faith, and so too life in this world. This is God’s world, it may be broken but it still belongs to Him and it’s awaiting His renewal. We live in the awareness the world as it is, is not what it will one day be. The pain we experience in life is meant lift our gaze from where we are to where we are going and what God has promised to do.

It is right, and good, to mourn over difficulty, pain, and loss, but we do not mourn as those without hope. You can have faith without hope, but you cannot have hope without faith. God is faithful, He is trustworthy, He is merciful, He will provide.

Conclusion: As I conclude this morning, I want to draw your attention to Jesus. Evidently, Jesus knew the stories we read this morning because He reenacted one of them in His own ministry. In John 6, we read of a time when a crowd of thousands surrounded Jesus, hungry for His teaching about God. Jesus was concerned, not just about their spiritual hunger but about their physical hunger as

well. Jesus took five small loaves of bread and two fish, He blessed them, multiplied them, and fed the crowds until they had their fill.

Later, when questioned about what He had done, Jesus said, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty...I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me...For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”*⁴

“48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died...51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.”

Jesus filled their stomachs, but more than a few grumbled against Him. I came across the following cartoon and couldn’t resist posting it to Instagram. The cartoon depicts Jesus holding out bread and fish to the crowd—one person says, “I can’t eat that; I’m vegan;” another person asks, “Has that fish been tested for mercury?”; a third person asks, “Is that bread gluten-free?”

Jesus did more than fill their stomachs; He gave them a revelation that could sustain them through empty stomachs, heartache, and loss. A life without hunger, or thirst, a life without end—this is His promise, this is the life that is coming. Jesus can make this promise because He is the Source of Life.

I have known God’s faithfulness in both blessing and loss; those who know my story, know that there is more that I could tell. My Calgary

⁴ John 6:35, 38, 40.

years were years of life and death. In a seven year period, my nephew died at 12 days old, my brother-in-law died at 26, and my mother died in her late 50's. Faith, suspicion, and provision—this is my story, it was Israel's story, and it might be your story too. Perhaps you are in need of learning, or relearning, who God is...who He can be for you.

Let me encourage you to put Jesus through the paces and see if He doesn't stand up to the test. The Son of God descended from Heaven, took on our flesh and blood, trusted the Father at every turn—through opposition, accusation, and even death on the cross. Three days He lay buried, but on the third day He rose from the grave; even now He sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding for you and me, strengthening us to persevere in faith and trust.

Jesus is trustworthy and true; He has been, He is, and He will ever be faithful. When you are going through the test, put your trust in Him.

Let us pray.

Prayer

Worship

Benediction