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Third Sunday in Lent

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL

3:10

God is With Us...

I. *when we want Him to be, and;*

II. *when we don't.*

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Did you know that in the 18th and 19th centuries a common symbol of welcome and hospitality was the pineapple? This was first pointed out to me while vacationing in Superior/Duluth where there is a mansion called Fairlawn Mansion. There on the tour they pointed out why pineapples of all things were included in the ornate woodwork of the home. In essence the pineapple was such a rarity and a specialty it came to represent goodness and hospitality. Much care and trouble went into bringing this prized fruit to Europe where it was quite popular. People in those days could often spend weeks or longer visiting. The host would often proudly display a pineapple as a sign of welcome. There could come a time however when the guest would enter their guest bedroom and the pineapple was no longer there and the message was subtle but clear; thanks for the visit, but...

God had His own version of the Pineapple in the Old Testament in dealing with His chosen people: it came in the form of a special cloud and in the forms of manna and water from the rocks. These were more than signs of hospitality that God was with them, they were the presence of God giving protection and sustenance and the assurance that God's people would prevail. This special presence of God is what Paul talks about today; Paul is looking back to when God led His people out of bondage in Egypt. Moses tells us that as he was leading the people from the land of bondage and slavery in Egypt the Lord, the God almighty was with them. Moses records for us:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt."...By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. (Exodus 13:17-22).

Why did God do this? To assure them they were not alone and to display His power and might that they may put all their faith and trust in Him who is able to save from even the world's fiercest enemies.

When Pharaoh and the full might of the Egyptian army pursued the Jews God there too displayed His might and authority over nature.

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."...

Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. (Exodus 14:10-22).

Thus God saved His people from their enemies; He brought them out from bondage and slavery to freedom. This was God's work made possible solely through God's presence and work. What does Paul say about these actions? **"They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."** (verse 2).

What a powerful work of salvation God had performed for His people. No better description can be stated than the very words of Moses: **"And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant."** (Exodus 14:31). They were glad to be sure. So great was God's work that Moses sang these words: **"Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you--majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"** (Exodus 15:11).

In short, the people were glad to have God. Look at what God had done for them! But God wasn't done with them for He promised to make them into a great nation and to give them a land of their own. This He would do. How great one is to have God on their side.

God is faithful and God is good. It was God who provided for the people that they would eat miraculous food called manna in the desert; and it was God that provided water for them. God provides for those whom He loves and He displayed that love time and time again for forty years in a special way providing manna and water and clothing for all the people. God provided for all of their wants.

Today we don't have a pressing Egyptian army enslaving us but that does not mean our lives are free from problems--the most important one being far more dangerous than any earthly power. Today all of us are faced with our imminent death and the death of all of our loved ones. This is a result from sin. Yet, just like with the Israelites whom the Lord saved by His power and might so to are we saved because God is with us.

What does Paul say? **“They all are the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.”** (verses 3-4). Yes they had Jesus and we have Jesus too.

Today we have Christ in His word that declares us not guilty and saved because of His death. We have the water of life which enlivens and refreshes our souls unto eternity. We have Jesus who tells us today: **“whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”** (John 4:14b). Today we have everything! Today we are saved. Today we have life and no one not even the devil himself can take that away from us because God is on our side!

Sadly this doesn't mean we are free from danger; but what it does mean is that the danger lies within ourselves. Yes, we are our own worst enemies and within our old sinful nature ever present ever wooing us away from God is the possibility of death. True, no one can take us from Christ but, as Paul points out, we can all to freely of our own sinful nature and desires leave Christ.

To be sure there are times when God is welcomed. Today we are reminded that there are other times when God isn't wanted nor welcomed in our lives--we want to be alone. What exactly happened to those Israelites who were baptized into the cloud and passed through the Red Sea into safety? Paul tells us: **“They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.”** (verses 2-5).

Some of them abandoned God by creating for themselves a golden idol in the form of a calf and they worshipped that rather than the God who saved them. Some of those same men who had seen the cloud with their own eyes and who had been sustained by the power of God's grace were the same men who intermingled with Moabite women sexually and abandoned God's call to holiness and purity. (see Numbers 25). For this twenty-three thousand of them were put to death.

They tested God's goodness and they grumbled and rebelled against God for not doing more. What was the final result? Of the great number of people (600,000 men over the age of twenty alone!) only two--Joshua and Caleb actually entered the Promised Land. (Of course there were others, name the offspring of those who perished entered the Promised Land.)

We might think to ourselves that they really were a wicked people for they had seen with their own eyes the working of God. That is true but what does it say about us? Are we any less faithful because we only have God's Word as a testimony to the truth and to what God has laid out for our lives? Do we dare think that only if God was more present in our lives then we could be more holy and more empowered to be the kind of people He calls us to be?

After all its God's fault that we want good things in our lives. Sure we have wants and desires and we work hard for those things. God isn't displeased with hard work nor is God even displeased with earthly wealth as many of the patriarchs were rather wealthy people. But what is the cost?

Isn't it God's fault that pornography and temptation is so pleasing. If God doesn't want us to behave in this fashion then why bother burdening us with such a human drive?

If God doesn't want us to live like He doesn't exist then why doesn't He make Himself more available and widely known? After all He is God, just think of the good if God made a cameo appearance in the world and showed people with their own eyes His presence and His existence?

That takes us back to the text of St. Paul though, doesn't it. The truth of the matter is that God was visibly present with those Israelites and He displayed His powers clearly and presently ever day of their lives and it wasn't enough for them. Today God is present in His Word and in His sacraments and the question is: Is this enough for us?

The fact of the matter is that there are times in our lives when we not only need God but we really want God. There are those times when our faith is a joy and a pleasure and we know that God has so much more in store for us--we have our pineapples on display! But there are other times too. There are those times when we want to be left alone and indulge ourselves in whatever it is that we want, be it excessive work, or self, or whatever. Then God is not so welcome.

Today Paul has us understand that these times when the world, and even more powerfully ourselves is drawing us away from God and we don't want Him around God is there too. Paul says it this way: **“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”** (verse 13). ‘Stand up’ under temptation under God's power...sounds a lot like God's words to Moses: **“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still”** (Ex. 14:13-14).

Today God continues to show us a hospitality and a welcome that is one of a kind. God's love and hospitality, His patience and goodness is rooted solely out of His goodness and nothing on our part. His welcome extends to us even despite our worst. Stand firm in God and you will not fail--for His love does not fail. Amen.