

Sermon: Hope that Does Not Disappoint

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 12, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

‘Saving Private Ryan’ is a 1998 blockbuster war movie, directed by Steven Spielberg. Set in 1944 France, during WW II, Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hank, was given a near impossible assignment. He took command of a small band of soldiers, tasked to locate and extract a missing private, James Ryan from the front line of the U.S. Army during the Normandy invasion. Apparently, Ryan’s three other brothers had only recently been killed in battle, and the Army Command had wanted to spare the family the horrifying loss of another son.

It was a decision based not on tactical nor strategic ground, but on a humane concern—the right thing to do. But it meant risking the lives of Miller and those under his command, as they had to traverse long stretch of contested territory, in order to locate, and with the hope of saving Private Ryan.

There is this particular scene, as Captain Miller and those under his command were walking through a field, the soldiers were griping and complaining about the futility of their mission, about wasted opportunities and wasted fighting resources. Miller was invited by one of the men to join in their griping, to voice his own discontent of the mission, “Say Captain, what about you? You don’t gripe at all?”

Miller replied calmly with a smile, “I don’t gripe to you, Private. I am a Captain, there’s a chain of command. Gripes go up, not down. Always up. You gripe to me, I gripe to my superior officer, so on, so on, and so on.”

Unsatisfied with that response, the soldier pushed further with a role reversal, “Let’s say, you are not the captain, and I am a Major. What do you say to that.”

Miller replied, still with a smile, “Well, in that case, I say this is an excellent mission, with an extremely valuable objective, sir. Worthy of my best effort, sir. More over, I feel heart-felt sorrow for the mother of Private James Ryan, that I am ready to lay down my life, and the lives of my men, only to ease her suffering.”

The other soldiers looked on to that exchange with wide-eye amusement. One commented, “Oh, he is good!” The other added, “I love him.”

I love that scene. Whenever, I am tempted to gripe or complain about something, anything, I always remember that scene: ‘Gripes go up, not down. Always up!’

In this week’s lectionary reading, we come to face to face with a pretty ugly gripe: ‘*Give us water to drink!*’ That was the demand the Israelites brought to Moses as they journeyed through the wilderness of Sin, camping nearby to Rephidim. Give us water to drink, the Israelites demanded, and it was not an unreasonable ask.

Water is one of those things that you can’t have too much, and you can’t have too little. Too much will overwhelm everything with terrifying force, with destructive flood. Too little, the ground cracks open, plants wither, and living bodies shrivel.

Recently, I read in the news of the water shortage in much of the U.S. Southwest. Apparently, the Colorado River is drying up due to a historic drought, combining with the chronic overuse of water resources by communities around it. The situation is getting so dire that municipalities and states are fighting legal wars, so far, against each other over water allocation quotas. Water restrictions are so severe in some communities, that people are resorting to peeing outside instead of in toilets, just to save a flush. Oh, the irony of people living in million dollar mansions, in gated communities, in beautifully sun-kissed landscape, peeing outside on cactus bush.

Coming back to the Israelites, they were thirsty, their children and livestock were dying of thirst. Days and weeks of travelling in the desert would do that. So in desperation, they turned to Moses, the leader who led them into the wilderness in the first place. And they griped, “*Give us water to drink!*”

What was Moses supposed to do? What could a man give to satisfy the thirst of a million? Yet Moses knew the quarrelling of the Israelites, as much as it had to do with physical reality, with bodily limitation, it was also a test—a test of the Lord God. So Moses griped up, as he cried out to the Lord, “*What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me.*”

The burden of leadership was not his to bear alone, the predicament of the people of God is God's responsibility—ultimately the buck stops at

God. It was the Holy One of Israel who led the people into that parched land, it would be the Almighty Lord of Host who shall lead the people out, and the Lord God did not disappoint.

The Lord provided, while instructing Moses, *“Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”* Moses did so, and water came out of that rock at Horeb, free-flowing, crystal clear, cool and refreshing, with immeasurable abundance, and the people’s thirst was crunched.

Stories of Israelites’ journey with God in the wilderness are analogous to our own journey of faith. Just as the Israelites travelled through parched land, we too experience dryness and thirst, spiritually and physically.

Just as the people of God took their gripes to Moses, and Moses took them to God, we too can take our complaints, our laments to God in prayer. Sure you could send them my way, but I will just pass them up to the Lord. Gripes go up! Because the question that you ask, that we all ask, is the same question asked by the Israelites, “Is the Lord among us or not?” And if you are not asking that question, someone else around you is.

The Gospel reading this week has the story of Jesus meeting with the Samaritan woman by the well, it’s a wonderful story the centres around a profound revelation of Jesus as the living water.

However, I have opted to focus on the Epistle of Romans, Apostle Paul’s letter to that congregation. Because Paul introduces to us another way to look at the parched condition of our body and soul. In the midst of his exhortation on the doctrine of justification by faith, Paul lists a number of blessings that we can expect through faith in Jesus, the Son of God, including peace or reconciliation with God, access to grace, sharing in the glory of God, and the most surprising blessing of all, that is affliction.

Listen to how Paul explains this, in Romans 5:3-5, *“And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.”*

God never promise us that faith in Christ will to lead to success, however the world defines it. God never promise us that our journey of faith shall be straight and smooth. Rather, afflictions and sufferings are all part of life, as well as part of faith.

But faith in Christ Jesus shapes us internally, the followers of Christ, a resiliency that is unmatched by anything else in the world, a resiliency which Apostle Paul traces sequentially as ‘affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope’.

And hope that does not put us to shame, hope that does not disappoint, simply because the love of God and the Holy Spirit that has been poured into our hearts, our souls, our breath and our very being. In such a way, affliction and suffering becomes, to us the followers of Christ, a blessing.

Moses called the place Massah and Meribah—Massah means ‘to test’, Meribah means ‘to quarrel’. It is a reminder of the griping and complaining of the people of God, but it is also a reminder to us, on that occasion, God demonstrated his love, his provision, and his glory. Water flowed from the rock, God came through, Moses was not put to shame.

In time, God would come through again and again, through Christ Jesus, our Lord, our Living Water, and our hope that will not disappoint.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.