

The 11th Sunday after Pentecost, proper 14, August 2, 21015. Exodus 16:2-4, 9-16
Ephesians 4: 1-16; John 6:24-35 St. Augustine's, Freeland.

It's a familiar story, isn't it? An oppressed people escape away only to wander in search of a place to call home; they journey through desolate mountains, coming to a point of crisis, when, finally, they're saved by birds! What birds were they? Seagulls! I was talking about the Mormons, not the Israelites! The stories are both what are called etiological stories – stories of origin – they explain how things came to be, and where we came from.

The Biblical stories are our stories of origin as Christians.

And the stories are always bigger than the events they describe – they're not literal – or perhaps not only literal; they convey some very basic truths about what it means to be a human being, especially one descended from the original group.

There's an ongoing argument in academic circles about where the Israelites came from – some say the biblical account is historical, others that while it contains some historical truths the bible's narrative is intended to convey more than historical events.

The thing about the bible is that we will never truly grasp the amazing truths it seeks to convey if we focus on the literalism of the stories; rather, the invitation is to look into the stories and ask what they mean for us – what truths do these stories convey that matter for us, here on Whidbey Island in 2015.

In Exodus, the human story is very familiar – whining, denial, scape-goating, The vivid bloom has gone off of freedom's rose, the adrenalin isn't pumping any more; instead it's a hard-scrabble existence where this new community is always on the edge of not making it.

And so this nomadic group wails at their travail in the desert, and corporately yearns for the “fleshpots” of Egypt, where there was always plenty of food. How soon we forget the old hard times when faced with new hard times! In its absence slavery doesn't seem quite so bad!

This is so human! We all too easily forget some of the realities of our past because they no longer hold any currency for us– the present is everything! And when faced with present struggles it's so much easier to find a scapegoat and pile our sins on the poor animal than to deal with the fact that the past is intimately connected with who we are now, and what we're experiencing. No! It's Moses! Moses is the cause – it's all his fault!

One of the challenges of leadership is that it is, in part, anyway, about disappointing people at a level then can stand. This nomadic group, wandering around the Sinai, were in danger of crossing that line that marks the difference between acceptable and unacceptable disappointment! Watch out, Moses!

Human crises never occur out of the blue, and never from a single cause. The Titanic sunk not because it saw an iceberg too late: it sunk because it's rudder was too small, it didn't have

enough pairs of binoculars, the 4th Officer slowed the ship instead of speeding it up, the ship was turned to the left when it would not have sunk if it had hit the iceberg straight on....you get the picture – lots of little things that, by themselves, didn't really matter, came together, and “wham!!” Or, perhaps glug, glug, glug....!

The rest of the Exodus message offers a different way – it calls the people to go beyond their narrow blaming behavior and be open to both to their own personal and corporate responsibility for their predicament, and also to be open to where their faith was leading them.

The message of the quail and the manna is clear: not just that God provides *The Essential sustenance* when all else has failed. No, it's more even than that: in the face of death, real, metaphorical, personal, spiritual....in the face of death God gives life. With God there's never a point when it's too late for an individual or a community.

Some have said, of this view, that you could sum it up with an aphorism: “Where there's life there's hope.” But that's not what this story says; rather it's this: “Where there's God there's life.” Communities fail all the time. It's only when we let go of our own, precious world-view that places us at the center and in control and admit, with a dejected C.S.Lewis that God is God and we are not that our community – like any community of faith – will truly understand what it means to live, **AND BE ABLE TO DO SO WITH JOY!**

The Epistle ties in with this theme – this is one of my most favorite non-Pauline passages in the New Testament. The author is held captive. We all think of it as a literal captivity, by the Empire, but there's a double-meaning here – a diametrically opposed meaning: the author is held captive by God, too; God's love is so strong he can't break away, even if he wanted to.

Out of that captivity this man wants to be clear about what really matters, what matters in the end: building up the body of Christ in love. The whole of Ephesians is about that – the community gathered that becomes the Body of Christ.

We're a part of that greater community that is the Church, and we are that community here that is this church, so this applies to us directly. That's why when the author lists the tools to build up the body of Christ he's talking to us. Here they are: faithful integrity, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing each other IN LOVE, speaking the truth IN LOVE, unity in God's Spirit, and the bond of peace.

We don't always do that; we don't always live the way our faith calls us to live – but not intentionally so. It's simply that failure's part of what it means to be human. Acknowledging our flaws and mistakes when we fail, and keeping on trying – to be faithful, humble, gentle, patient, bearing each other IN LOVE, speaking the truth IN LOVE – is part of what it means to be a Christian.

The author doesn't stop there, though. We are working to build up the body of Christ, but that's not an end in itself, we do it because the body of Christ has a purpose: ministry. If the Saints are not being equipped for the work of ministry then “the body Christ” is just a meaningless phrase.

We have to walk the talk or we are nothing.

So how will we know how we're doing? There are some markers identified in this passage that are central – benchmarks of Christian living, if you will, things that will be present and which can be used to help us get a sense of our journey:

- Unity of faith
- Knowledge of Jesus
- Maturity
- the measure of the full stature of Christ.

No one's perfect – not even me (!) Today, Exodus and Ephesians invite us to reflect on our responsibilities to our community of faith, which, ultimately are our responsibilities to God, and do a status check: how are we doing?

And, of course, to act on what we find!