
WORD MADE FLESH

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Corinthians 7:17,32-35; Mark 1:21-28

Our Experience of Meribah and Massah

These are grumbly texts. Our glimpse of the Incarnation fades so quickly. It is just over a month ago, four Sundays into Ordinary Time, since we attended to the feast of the Incarnation. In such a short span we discover - just as the texts for today tells us - how quickly and easily we lose the edge of life. We grow stubborn, harden our hearts and lose that clear vision glimpsed at the feast. At the feast, a short time ago, we were certain we had grasped the coming together of the sacred and the prophetic, the experience and call to the newness of life at the heart of the revelation of Christ's birth.

Today's texts have a common echo in Psalm 95, a Psalm that is also the Invitation in Morning Prayer in the Liturgy of Hours. Psalm 95 expresses our struggle to open in the act of attention and adoration, to open to the life-giving waters of the Fountain of Life. Contemplation would appear to be easy in the moments of theophany, the moments when the holy is shown forth, illuminating the world. But, "at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the desert" our hearts harden so easily.

Meribah, Massah are the ordinary days of our lives, days when we fail to hear the words of the Prophets calling us to the Covenant, the way of Torah, the daily acts that sanctify life. Moses, in today's text, issues such a call.

Meribah, Massah are the ordinary days, days when our minds and hearts fall into anxiety as the words of the Apostle Paul remind us in his letter to the fledgling church at Corinth. It is a life without anxiety, content in the vocation God has given, the vocation present at hand, that frees one of all restraint so that one is open to "unhindered devotion."

Meribah, Massah are the ordinary days, the days that accumulate, almost unnoticed, days by which our lives are numbered.

In today's Gospel we find Jesus with his disciples going to Capernaum, to the synagogue. He teaches and the disciples marvel at his authority. In the midst of this a man with an unclean spirit cries out: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

"What have you to do with us?" This is both recognition of the divine and a blaming of the divine. Recognition that, instead of leading to openness, is a refusal of life. This is the question of the day at Meribah, at Massah. It is at the heart of the Apostle's concern with the fledgling church at Corinth. The Corinthians are caught up in their anxiety about serving their families and about serving God.

Anxiety gets in the way of our recognizing the presence of the Divine as the life-giving source in our very midst. While the Divine may be recognized, it is sometimes understood to threaten and destroy us, as it was by the man in the synagogue at Capernaum.

So with the Psalmist we pray, in this ordinary time, that today our hearts would not be hardened and we would listen to the life-giving voice in our midst.

David J. Goa