

This week will be a bit different, as I imagined myself to be one of the Israelites and how I would experience this journey through the desert.

Desert

Hot, dry, dust. Rocks, stones, sand. Sun, wind, heat. Dry, parched throat, empty stomach.

After three days travelling through the desert it was enough. We rebelled! Moses! Where did you lead us. You and your God were supposed to lead us to the promised land. And what did we get?! Sands, stone, rock! Where are the plants, where is water!

Finally we got to a oasis – but the water was bitter – Marah we called it, ‘bitter’ in our language. Not only the water was bitter, we were bitter. It is remarkable how quickly our moods change. Three days before we were celebrating, dancing and singing because we escaped Pharaoh and his slavery – hard work baking stones, not enough food, our eldest kids were even killed, but now that life seems much better then following this idiot Moses and that God of his.

Moses, cried out to his God, and then remarkably threw and old stick in the water and the water changed and we could drink it. What a blessing. Moses said that God did this, but I did not care, I was so thirsty!

After a few days we came to another oasis, Elim, and finally we had plenty of water and food. Life is good when we have everything we need...

More desert...

Why did we move away from Elim?! We had water and food, why is Moses taking us further into the desert? I know full well that we are going south and not east, to Canaan. This direction there is only sand, stone, rocks and mountains. We cannot continue like this. I wish we had remain in Egypt: we at least had enough to eat and drink. Life was good in Egypt. Some of us wished they stayed in Egypt to die there, they feel that they would have had a better lot then. Again people complained to Moses and they nearly revolted! They were accusing Moses that it was all his fault, as he took us out of Egypt.

However a small voice in my mind knows that this is still better, then living in Egypt. Maybe this God of Moses, who he claims is the God of our ancestors, maybe he will help again, like when the water was made sweet so we could drink it...

Quail and Manna

We had food! The night before last the whole camp got overflown by quail... fat, juicy and tasty quail. We could just grab them, kill them and roast them. It was wonderful! And then this morning I got up and the whole camp was covered with thin flakes! We said to each other: “What is it!, what is it!” And everyone was excited! You could hear

“Manna, Manna” all over the place, as that is what it sounds like in our language. Moses explained that this is the bread that the Lord God has given us, and we were to take just enough for what we needed, about 3 pounds per person. Of course there were some who hoarded it... but the next day it had gone off, all grubby and smelly. And why would we take more than we need... it was there again the next day and the day after and so on. God was taking care of us. Maybe we should start to listen to him, maybe we should not be so suspicious all the time when things do not fall into place immediately.

We still do not know where we are going... but who cares: we have food... And when Moses said that on the sixth day we should gather twice as much, as tomorrow it would be a sabbath to the LORD and there would not be any. Maybe God also needs a rest sometimes, like we do. So we did, although some went to look on the seventh day and yes, they did find nothing. And some went hungry that day, as they had not gathered enough the day before!. O well, there are always a few like that. I think I like this God of Moses, which he calls the LORD (The “I am who I am”). He speaks a bit grumpy, like he has no patience with us, but so far he has always provided what we needed. But he does want us to listen to him and to Moses.

The day before the quail and the Manna came, he appeared to us in the desert: there was a cloud that shone in a certain way. We all felt silent when we saw that and wanted to fall on our knees. “The Glory of the LORD”, is what Moses said it was. And he said that God said ‘I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, “At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.”’

Yes, now I know that Yahweh, the LORD, is our God, is my God. I wonder why I had not seen it before? He did take us out of the slavery of Egypt, and he did open the sea for us to pass through and then closed it again so that the Egyptians drowned. He did all that but then when there is an issue, like no food or water, we immediately got up in arms and complained. Yes, God is right to say that we are grumbling. And yes, we do not want to be here, and, yes, the desert is not a nice place to walk in and it is hot, and sandy, stony and windy, and my feet hurt, and the sheep are noisy and my pack is heavy. But our God provides for us. I feel that I can trust him now, maybe just a little bit more.

God is in the desert

I thought that the desert was an empty place, devoid of life, love, pleasure, full of risk and danger and hard work. And yes, it is, but it is also the place where we met with God. I wonder if all of us at some stage have to come to a desert, willingly or in our case unwillingly, so that we can find God for ourselves. No distractions, nothing for us to do, just to be in the presence of God, and to completely rely on him and not on our own strength? As you find that in the desert you do not have enough strength left, and you do need to rely on God.

Afterword

Maybe you are feeling like you are in a desert yourselves. Maybe there is a time of illness, of despair, and even if you have food and drink and a house, it feels like you are living in a desert. But maybe that is where you have to look more carefully, and have higher expectations, as this is where people have found Yahweh, the Lord our God.

And for some people a physical desert might feel like an oasis, due to the lack of people there. As the band America wrote in 1971:

I've been through the desert on a horse with no name
It felt good to be out of the rain
In the desert you can remember your name
'Cause there ain't no one for to give **you no pain**

Sometimes the desert consists of many people around us not caring. Sometimes we can be alone in a crowd. Whatever the shape of the desert you are in, God is with you.

Whilst quite a few of us have found ourselves in the desert of the isolation of the Covid-19, others have found it a real blessing. The desert may not be something physical like the Sinai, the desert may be of a different shape, and each one of us may be longing to be away from this place so that no one can give us pain.

But maybe it is in the pain that we find God, and that when we avoid pain, we avoid God. In the universe God is in all times and places - God is present everywhere and at every time. If we believe that, then we also have to believe that Jesus is on the cross at this precise time for us. He has not avoided pain for us and he does not avoid pain for us. In his pain he found God for us and reconciled us to him. So maybe we should rejoice when we are in times of pain, as this is where God is with us and where we learn to depend on him.

Amen.