

Sometimes a parishioner will come up to me and say, “Fr. Chip, is reading the Bible all that necessary? I’ve tried it so many times – but it’s so *boring*.” I ponder that sometimes. I suppose if you stack the Bible alongside a John Grisham novel or some such, it can seem like dull stuff – particularly if we tend to read more for entertainment than for anything else. But, you see, this really stems from focusing on *our* reading. It’s all about *me*. Am *I* interested in this? Does this book stimulate *me*, excite *me*?

The thing about the Bible is, IT reads US. We pick up a passage and, more often than not, we recognize *ourselves* in the stumbles and struggles of its characters. Take, for example, the Exodus passage we read [*red*] this morning. Those thirsty Israelites, on first glance, seem entirely different from us.

A miraculous escape from Egypt – God supplying them water, bread and meat – it’s so unlike our experience. We don’t have things like that happening to us. So why read such stuff?

Ah, but read a bit more closely. Suddenly, they sound quite familiar indeed. How many times have we found ourselves in a crisis or some moment of need, and we send up a quick prayer: “Lord, help me!” The answer may not come in as dramatic a form as what the Israelites experienced, but the human dynamics are the same. We may bring a more skeptical mind to all this than such a primitive people did, but nevertheless, we pray that prayer expecting it to be heard by a God who acts, expecting a response from a God who gets involved.

- You’re driving through a thick fog – and somehow make it through.
- You undergo shoulder surgery – and, by gosh, the thing actually starts working again!

On the other side of the crisis, we breathe a prayer of thankfulness – and why? We sense God has been present.

But even after the fact, we’re no different from those Israelites. What happened to them? They prayed their prayer of thankfulness – and then what? They went on with life just as they had before – no closer to God and their faith no stronger. Same with us.

Who says we're so different? You see what's happened? Yes, we read the Bible – but actually the Bible reads *us*.

This passage is saying that, surprise, God already knows we're going to react just like they did. God knows all about us – knows all about our failings. Knows we are faithless sometimes – and unreliable. God is not surprised by our struggle to believe. Throughout the book of Exodus, the narrator portrays the people whom God has called in the most unflattering terms. The most human, just-like-us, terms. They come off looking frail, unstable – and quick to lose heart.

The amazing thing, though, is that God doesn't give up on these spiritual fly-by-nighters. Even when they murmur that they wish God had killed them when they were still in Egypt, God does not give up on them. God does not “wash his hands” of this unfaithful lot. The whole point of this story is that God graciously provides, even when that graciousness would strike us as surprising. Though they did not deserve such mercy, God in God's “God-ness” proved utterly faithful and consistently compassionate.

During this Lenten season, we turn to stories like this one – and the story found in our Gospel today – to remind us that God – and God's word – *still* reads us. God still sees in us the vivid contrast with God's self – and loves us anyway.

Look at the people Jesus calls to be his disciples. None of them are particularly impressive. Peter leaps before he looks... James and John are nicknamed “sons of thunder” out of their flashing hot tempers. All of them got embroiled in the argument as to who would have the most prestige in the coming kingdom. A bone-headed lot if ever there were one. But Jesus, the Son of God in human skin, the ever faithful one, called them anyway. He lived and died for them – and took their places, as he takes ours, on the cross. God, in Christ, was ever true – even when we (we find that here again the scripture reads us) we are faithless.

The fact is, God's people were often faithless. The place where the people complained in the Exodus story is called *Massah* – meaning “test” – as in “putting God to the proof” – when, in fact, it was God bailing *us* out.

Jump back to today. It's still going on.

I remember some years ago going to a parishioner's home to bring communion. The man was wracked with pain, filled with cancer. “Would you like to receive communion?” I asked him. Bitterness tinged his voice as he replied, “Not after what God has done to

me!” We often think that if God is truly with us, we can somehow escape or detour difficulty. Our faith may flicker and even die out. But in fact, God is faithful – faithful in ways more profound than our comfort, or even our health.

God continues to wrap loving arms around us, continues to call us God’s own. At the same time, God is not a God who loves from afar. This one who comes in our frail flesh and endures bitter trials, from the parched desert to the derisive shouts of a bloodthirsty crowd on Good Friday, is one who was very much present among the Israelites that day at Massah. God did not denounce them for their faithlessness. Nor did God refuse their cry for water.

There is no limit to what God can do! This one who speaks and worlds are born, who touches a life and makes it new, is also one who stoops to our weakness, who brings water out of a rock even when the Israelites ask for all the wrong reasons. This biblical story is no guarantee that God will always do our bidding, regardless of the motivation or foolishness of our request – but it does demonstrate amply that God is always, *always*, committed to God’s people, and is always ready to intervene, to act on our behalf.

Do we learn that, really, without reading the Bible? I’m not sure we do. We need those stories of godly mothers and broken hearts and faithless children and ill-focused disciples to remind us that, though *cultures* have surely changed, *people* surely have *not* changed. No modern novel can match the Bible when it comes to capturing the full canvas of the human story. We need to keep reading these exquisitely powerful stories to be reminded that we are flesh just as they were, we are fickle and faithless – and, on our own merits, dead – just as were this chosen people of so long ago.

And so we come to the next step of the Lenten journey – the step of realizing how important it is to stay in touch with the biblical record – to keep reading the Bible even when it doesn’t sometimes capture our immediate attention or interest. The *Bible* reads *us*. That’s the message with which we go home today. And it can’t read us if, *first*, we don’t read the Bible.