

Sermon 14th September Exodus 14:19-31; Exodus 15:1-11
‘Reasons for Thanksgiving’

Prayer: Lord we thank you for your presence is with us whatever is happening in our lives. We know your love and protection cover us even in the darkest moments and you will never let us go. Enable us to remember your words of love and promise so that our trust is not eroded and hope remains. Amen.

Here at St Johns we are in a season of thanksgiving, the last Sunday of September is our annual Thanksgiving Sunday. It has been a tradition of St Johns since the early days to make an annual financial gift to the Lord’s work here at St Johns that is over and above our regular tithing / giving. This year it has been agreed we will put our thanks offerings towards the establishment of a fund for the Children and Youth Leader’s salary.

There is more detail in the newsletter on this matter – but here at St Johns the thanksgiving offering we make is over and above our regular offering which are for the work of this church. We have been well blessed here by the level of giving the Lord does lay upon our hearts, so it is with real thanksgiving we observe this season.

When Peter and I began to plan this month, he asked how it might be a focus with the Sunday themes and we decided to trust the Lord. I know I should know by now the Lord can be trusted, and fortunately the Lord doesn’t tire of my need to be shown again and again! What better scriptures to have as a foundation for thanksgiving than our faith ancestor’s story of liberation from slavery; the winning power of YHWH God over other ‘god’s; the presence of YHWH God with his people in new and terrifying conditions; the providential parting of the Red Sea and its return; and next week the provisioning of enough food to keep the people fit / healthy for their journey... These are just some of the stories of our faith which make the case for our having reasons for thanksgiving!

In this season of exploring the great stories of our faith, we have been concentrating on God’s actions with and for his people after 430 odd years of their living in Egypt (some 6-7 generations). We have reflected on Moses call into this ministry and God’s use of the burning bush, we have reflected on the power struggle between YHWH God and Pharaoh’s gods – and how “our” God won because Pharaoh let the people go after the death of all non-sacrifice/blood protected first-born sons!

Last week, we left the people at the point of receiving their instructions from Moses which included one to celebrate the “Pass-ing over” of the angel of death of their homes / families. Of course this meant death to the first born son for all households not protected with sacrificial blood smeared on the door frame; and meant life for all who followed Moses instructions. I want you to remember how an essential part of those instructions was to have your most precious possessions in travel bags, your shoes on your feet and coat on your back... literally ready to leave home and country.

Because leave they did, that very night, the Pharaoh’s slaves escaped – ran for their lives – and then the precise details we would love to have, *disappear*. Just where did the people go? A bit like a point or two of what I understand Liz’s sermon touched on, where is Mt Sinai? Which route did the slaves travel on to escape Pharaoh’s army? If it was Ramses II – it was one of the most sophisticated and ‘modern’ armies of the day and who were very successful if the carves temple pictures etc are even half right! cV

The Passover was the one final act of YHWH that snapped Pharaoh’s will and won the battle of the gods and it was terrifying. It is also fundamental to the understanding of Israel / the Hebrew people that in this act, God is telling them they are God’s first-born, with all the privileges and expectations tied to being a ‘first-born’. They **are loved beyond measure** and in this moment God’s people understood what to be set free really meant. What liberation, including liberation from slavery really meant and that our God sets people free from whatever would enslave – Pharaoh or addiction, emotion or action – **God liberates still**.

For our ancient slave-people, in exile their journey home began that Passover night. This journey home was on foot, with what they could carry, this 'group of refugees, terrified and in panic'* ran and in their running **they discovered God was with them**. The angel of God moved with them, the pillar of cloud protected their back. Where do we get the idea that God's presence in our lives means comfort and ease, because this picture is simply not biblical! God's people knew he was with them that the promise given – proved true – repeated in generation after generation. God is with us, **as he** was with these ancient people as they fled, with them in their **panic**, in their **refugee status**, in their **poverty and fatigue** and **hunger** and **terror** at what the future held... Cv

In our story we read that after the slaves were liberated, Pharaoh *changed his mind* and wanted his slaves, his labour force **back**. He sent his army out to ensure it. The people found that Pharaoh's army pushed them into an impossible situation. – Army on one side, water on the other – **and** the **promise** told to them by Moses that God was with them! This experience is so significant in understanding the Hebrew people's faith it can never be understated. The people had seen the battle of the Gods, **lived** through the 10 plagues and **run** when Moses told them to run, but it is the crossing of the red sea and total – final destruction of Pharaoh's power and army that consolidates their 'God-thinking'. Cv

In this experience Moses, Miriam and Aaron are cemented as the people's leaders and the relationship between God and his people is defined as being about family. About belonging, and being unchangeable! By unchangeable I mean like the old saying: 'you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family'. We can't change our blood-family – and in the story of the escape from Egypt God's people began the journey being God's blood-family (1st born) and they began the faith journey of what that really meant. And our second Exodus passage that John read for us- gives us one of their first reactions, Miriam led them in song, and thanks-giving dance.

They celebrated because God saved them – again! I love science catching up with our faith ancestor's stories of God's presence. We have their story faithfully remembered and passed on and in the late 1900's (1970 – 1990's) a deep sea diver called Ron Wyatt first broke the news of the discoveries of evidence of Pharaoh's army – at the bottom of the sea. Others have joined his discoveries.... (C wheel, axel)

Perhaps most amazing of all, is the presence of an under-water pathway, the 'modern' discovery of the land bridge, from Ian Rodley of NZ who used his depth sounder, the "Simrad CE32 Chart Plotter" plus GPS, to carry out depth soundings along the seabed in order to chart its shape and layout. I have put up 2 pictures showing this 'land-bridge'. (line-map 1, picture diag 2)

Along the length of the Gulf of Aquaba, depths reach to an average of one mile and the Egyptian shoreline drops steeply under water at a slope of about 45 degrees. If the Israelites had tried to have crossed anywhere else along the Gulf of Aquaba they would have been faced with an extremely steep drop to about one mile. With all of their animals and wagons, the task would have been practically impossible. Only here, on the shores of Nuweiba, does the 'pathway' drop off at a gradual slope of one in fourteen, to a depth of just over 850 meters. On the Saudi side the slope climbs again at a slope of one in ten. The Bible describes it as, "A way in the sea and a **path** in the mighty waters" (Isaiah 43:16, 17) The distance from Nuweiba to Saudi Arabia is about 9.6 miles. And the width of the under-water bridge is estimated to be 900 meters^{*1}

God was / God is with his people – in ways that are miraculous and mysterious. And no, we may not fully understand all, but one thing we do know: it is God's story with his chosen family and because of the love and grace that is poured out for all people - **we belong**. This story is our story about God at work with his people bringing them out of slavery. Then and now, God has not stopped, that's our belief.

It was real – **God is real** and so my challenge for you this week is to decide on one memory, action, event... in your life when you knew something was real; look for God in it and **give thanks!** Amen