

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 16th August 2020 – Andy Banks
2. God's Presence and Guidance
Ex 13:17-18, 21-22; Num 9:15-22; Josh 3:1-4

Part 2: Intro:

As we begin to emerge from lock down, we're encountering a strange new in-between sort of world with some freedoms, but tempered by facemasks, and handwashing, and bubbles, and ever-changing rules of what we can and can't do. School, work, shopping, leisure, church will all be unfamiliar and will take some getting used to. And, as Ron said two weeks ago, we may not always like the experience. So how do we maintain hope and persevere in such an abnormal world?

Today is the second in our mini-series, exploring what we can learn from the Israelites' experience in the wilderness. Like us, they faced a strange, interim sort of normal as they journeyed from their old normal of slavery in Egypt to the abundant new normal God had promised them in Canaan. And, as Andrew shared three weeks ago, their *interim* normal was not easy – so much so that they even wanted to return to *slavery* in Egypt rather than keep on trusting God through the difficult and frequently changing landscape of the wilderness. But they had to go through the wilderness on the way to Canaan, just as we have to go through this interim normal in order to reach the eventual Covid-safe *abundant* normal that I firmly believe God has for us ultimately!

And God had things to teach them along the way that would prepare them for the Promised Land to come. So, last week we looked at God's unchanging character. I AM WHO I AM. This week, we're looking at his continual *presence* and *guidance*, starting with three short readings. The first (Exodus 13:17-18, 21-22) describes events immediately after Israel left Egypt:

Exodus 13:17-18, 21-22

17When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.'
18So God led the people around by the desert road towards the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle.

21By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. 22Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

The second reading (from Numbers 9) describes God's presence over the Tabernacle – the tent that was set up as God's dwelling place in the Israelite camp throughout their wanderings in the desert.

Numbers 9:15, 17, 22

15On the day the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant law, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire ... 17Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites set up camp ... 22Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out.

And in the last reading (from the beginning of Joshua 3), God is about to lead his people across the River Jordan, into the Promised Land of Canaan. The ark of the covenant was a gold-covered box that was normally kept in the most inner room of the Tabernacle (except when it was being carried from one place to another). The ark was the primary symbol of God's presence with the Israelites.

Joshua 3:1-4

1Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. 2After three days the officers went throughout the camp, 3giving orders to the people: 'When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. 4Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it.'

[Pray]

Object lesson (outside on footpath):

I love walking in the countryside, especially if there are hills to climb or rugged coastlines to walk along – though I don't do it nearly as often as I'd like!

Now, when you go hillwalking you need the right equipment. You need good footwear, plenty of water and food (and some emergency rations), and enough layers of clothing to keep you warm and dry, because it can get cold on the tops of hills. And there are two other items that a walker should never be without: a map, and a compass. Otherwise it's easy to get lost.

But even with a map and compass it's possible to go wrong. I once took part in a 25-mile night hike in Cambridgeshire. To reach the first checkpoint, we had to turn right at the first telephone box on our map, which we did – only, since our map was printed, someone had erected an additional telephone box half a mile nearer to our start. So, we ended up on a large detour! Later on, we also missed a small turning in the dark and ended up off the map entirely in a town called St Neots!

Whether through human error, or an out of date map, or footpath closures or re-routing, maps aren't always full-proof guides. Nor are Sat Nav's for those who prefer modern technology. So, is there a full-proof way to be guided on paths you don't know, I wonder?

Game: Hide and seek (back inside)

If there are children in your house, you might want to pause the service now to play a game of "Warmer, Colder" and come back to part 3 afterwards. The game is that someone hides an object (or better still, some chocolate) somewhere in the house, and the others have to try to find it. The person who hid the object gives clues to help the others find it. As they start to look, if they are heading in the right direction, say "warmer," or if they start to go the wrong way, say "colder". You can also add in "hot" and "very hot," if you like, when the searchers get close to the hidden object. If you want to play along, pause now.

[Pause for game]

Otherwise, we're going to continue with another song.

[Song]

Part 3: Talk

For this next section of the service, we posted some activity sheets on the website, which children may wish to do during this short talk.

Now, a map and compass can be useful. But the point of the object lesson and the game is that it is even more useful to have someone personally showing you the way. Someone who knows where to go and what obstacles to avoid along the way. This is what the Israelites had in the wilderness. God was present with them in a pillar of cloud by day, which changed to a pillar of fire at night, so it could always be seen. Whenever the cloud of God's presence lifted and moved, the Israelites followed where God led them. Whenever it stopped, they pitched camp for as long as the cloud of God's presence stayed there.

It was a wonderful constant reminder, firstly, of the truth that God was always with them. Now, the Israelites had spent 400 years oppressed in a land whose so-called gods were symbolised by *physical* idols. So, as they began to learn to put their trust in the *real* God, he graciously gave them a physical sign of his presence with them to help them trust him.

We don't have such a physical sign today. Because we have something even better. Whenever anyone chooses to put their trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, the Holy Spirit of God comes to live not just *with* them, but *in* them. And one of his main roles is to bring the presence of God the Father and Jesus Christ into our lives. Paul says in Romans 8:16: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that *we are God's children.*"

We need to learn to listen to his voice more and more. And two of the most important ways we do that are through reading the Word he inspired (the Bible), and through talking with God in prayer, including prayers of adoration. Learn to believe the truth that God is with you always. Then, whatever new or difficult situations you may face, you will be comforted in knowing that you do not face them alone. You don't go to school alone, you don't go to work alone, you don't go to the shops alone. You go with God's presence in you if you are a believer in Jesus Christ.

And not only is that a benefit to you, but you can share the blessing of his presence with others whom you meet. Is someone else scared? Maybe you could pray for them or with them. Or maybe you could pray for wisdom for your management in creating a working environment that is as Covid-safe as possible, and then pray also that God will protect you and your colleagues. God is a God who answers prayer offered in faith.

But the cloud of God's presence – and in Joshua 3 the ark over which it rested – had another purpose, too. It was the means by which God showed the Israelites where they should go. There's a very interesting phrase in Josh 3:4: "Then you will know which way to go, since *you have never been this way before.*" They didn't know the best way to go or what lay ahead. But God did. Their job was simply to see where he was going and to follow him.

If they had been following the shortest route on a map, they would have been discouraged by facing war with the Philistines too early. God knew to take them a less direct route. God knew where they could find water

along the way – even if that water was concealed in a rock. God knew where they could camp that would keep them safe from wild animals. God knew the best way to lead them into the Promised Land. A way that would maximise their confidence in him and their enemies' fear of him. It was only when they disobeyed God and refused to follow his leading that they encountered danger or trouble – whether they refused to go when he said go or whether they tried to go when he said stay.

Now what was said of the Israelites could certainly also be said of us as a Church, as we prepare to facilitate face-to-face worship, hopefully in September: “You have never been this way before.” That can be daunting. And the rapidly changing landscape of what is and isn't permitted can be unsettling. But the secret to navigating this interim normal remains the same as it was for the Israelites: see where God is leading and follow him.

But how do we know where God is going when we can't see a cloud of his presence? The answer is we have to learn collectively and as individuals to tune in to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Over the years, talking to Christians about their experiences of God's guidance, a few things strike me. Firstly, and most importantly, the Holy Spirit will *always* guide in line with his revealed Word the Bible.

Within that framework, different Christians hear the Holy Spirit in different ways. Some have dreams with a clear meaning. Some receive pictures in prayer, and an understanding of what that picture means. Some sense a strong compulsion to a particular course of action that just won't go away, but grows and grows. Often God will bring to mind a particular Bible verse that speaks into a situation with pointed clarity. Sometimes that may come through someone else prophesying into our lives, whether they realise it or not.

But, although God speaks in many varied ways, for each individual, it seems to me that he often remains consistent in how he speaks to us. So, one person may regularly have dreams from God, whilst another may most often be guided simply by a strong impression of what is right. The key is to learn to tune in to how the Holy Spirit speaks to *you*, and to learn to recognise his voice. That takes time to discover, and the process is far more intuitive than could be conveyed in any kind of formula. It takes time spent in God's presence in prayer, and time spent with more mature Christians allowing them to test what we sense God is saying. We will make mistakes, but hopefully, with the right checks and balances, those mistakes will have minimal impact. And the blessings can be huge.

As a *Church*, guidance will often come through the process of discussions and even disagreements as we gather together, say in Church Members' Meetings or Deacons' Meetings. In the process of those discussions, it can become clear to the collective people of God in which direction we should travel. And that collective pooled listening and wisdom is a safeguard against big mistakes, either of trying to do something God has not ordered, or being too cautious when God has called us to act.

So, I believe that God will be with us and lead us through this interim normal, wherever it takes us, and however long it lasts. And I believe we will learn to trust him better for each decision through the process. But are you willing to join the adventure and to witness his ability to keep us safe and effective as his witnesses along the way? Are you willing to play your part in making this interim normal positive for us as a church?

As we approach the communion table, a table that unites us together as a church as well as unites us afresh to God, let's take a few moments to reflect on what we have heard and on what our response should be. **[Pause]**

Communion

God has made us a people:
 we have been shaped by God's will.
 Jesus calls us together:
 we meet (remotely) in Jesus' name.
 The Spirit binds us together:
 and leads us into truth.

Look, here is the Lord's Table spread as for a feast.
 Bread for breaking, wine poured for drinking:
 signs of his love and hospitality,
 symbols of his life broken, his blood poured out.

He is not dead!
 He is risen and present among us,
 evidence of God's covenant grace and promise.

So we come in faith to the table, you and I,
 companions on the journey.
 Some of us fresh and eager,
 others weary, in need of nourishment.
 All of us conscious of our failings.

Lets us each take a few moments to confess our failings to God.

[pause]

God's word says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9)

Come now, don't hesitate,
 the feast is ready
 and the Lord himself invites you.

"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.'"

Pass the bread around your household, and eat it as you receive it with thanksgiving.

[pause for passing]

"In the same way, after supper Jesus took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"

Pour out the wine or equivalent for your household and hold on to your cups until everyone is served. Then drink *together* as a sign not just of your commitment to each other, but your willing participation in God's collective Church.

[pause for pouring and drinking]

"Whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Take some time to pray:

- For God's presence and guidance as we negotiate the interim normal as a church
- For those we have sent out as missionaries, and for Trinity Church in Tula, as they negotiate what interim normal looks like in their settings
- For the persecuted Church, for whom Covid-19 has often added to their difficulties they already faced.
- For those in need among us, especially those who are grieving, sick or worried about financial difficulties