

April 9, 2023 – Exodus 3:1-10 & 1 Corinthians 15:19-28

I have never been to the Holy Land. It's something I would really love to do some time in my life. Although I'd prefer to do it sometime when the threat of violence is not quite so high. Though I suppose if I wait for that, I may never get there.

I've never been there. But during seminary, I had a professor who had been. In fact, he had been many, many times. You see, during the school year he was a seminary professor, but during the summer he was an archeological photographer who had worked at various archeology sites throughout Palestine. So he knew the whole region very, very well.

And he once told us that he always found something a bit amusing. You see, in our Old Testament lesson for today and in many other places throughout scripture, the Promised Land of Canaan is described as “a land flowing with milk and honey.” It is a land of unthinkable abundance. With fruit trees and vineyards and flocks of sheep and goats and hills filled with copper and forests filled with cedar trees. And it sounds like an absolute paradise.

And this amused him because that's not at all how Palestine looked to him. Yes, there is some decent farmland. Yes, there are some good pastures for sheep and cattle. And yeah, maybe at one time, there were copper mines and cedar forests, but not really anymore.

By and large, though, there is an awful lot of Israel that is just... desert. And mountains. And bare rock. With nothing growing for miles in any direction. Places that you go to and you think, “This is the land of milk and honey? Really?”

Yes, really. But that disparity between Scripture and reality should tell us something. The term “land of milk and honey” is already a phrase loaded with symbolism. When Moses heard the Lord refer to the Promised Land in that way, he did not expect to get there and find actual rivers of milk and honey. He knew perfectly well that this was a figure of speech.

But beyond being a simple turn of phrase, God was also using this expression prophetically. Because everything that Moses and the Israelites would go through in the Exodus was really a foreshadowing of things to come. A glimpse into the future.

Freeing the Israelites by the death of the firstborn pointed to our freedom by the death of God's only begotten Son. Parting the Red Sea and passing through the water so that Pharaoh and his armies might be drowned and die points to our passing through the water of baptism so that sin and the old Adam within us might be drowned and die. Water from the rock points to the living water we have in Jesus Christ. Manna in the desert points to the bread from heaven we receive in the Lord's Supper. The bronze serpent on a pole points to the cross of Jesus Christ and the healing for our souls that we receive every time we look to him.

And the land of milk and honey sounds like paradise because it is paradise. It is heaven. It is the resurrection. It is the same paradise that Jesus promised to the thief on the cross. Today you will be with me in paradise. Today you will be with me in the land of milk and honey.

It all fits together. One pointing to the other. This is the reason why we have a passage from Exodus as our Introit today. This is not just a song for Moses and Miriam and the Israelites to sing after Pharaoh was defeated and his army drowned in the Red Sea. This is a song for the church to sing after sin, death, and the devil are defeated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*“I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.”* Like Pharaoh thinking he could simply chase the Israelites down and enslave them all over again, the devil thought he could chase Jesus down and enslave us in death by killing him.

But God turned the tables on the horse and his rider. What he thought was a pathway to victory turned out to be a road to defeat. For on Easter morning, the Lord triumphed gloriously. He brought the waters crashing down on Satan's head. Waters that continue to drown him at every baptism. And indeed, at every moment that we remember our baptism and how Christ has already defeated him.

And so as we read this Old Testament lesson, we're not just reading the Lord's message to Moses. We reading the Lord's message to us. *"I have surely seen the affliction of my people... and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them... and to bring them up... to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey."*

The Lord heard the affliction of his people. He heard our cry because of our taskmasters. But it wasn't the affliction of Egyptian slavery or Egyptian taskmasters. It was the affliction of our slavery to sin and the taskmaster of the Law. Demanding that we suffer the penalty for every single thing we do wrong. Demanding that we remain enslaved to a cycle of temptation and sin and guilt and shame and punishment. A cycle that leads only to death.

He heard our prayer for freedom and he came down to deliver us. He came down as a baby in Bethlehem. He came down as our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He came down and he died on a cross that we might be free.

And yet, it's a freedom that we don't yet fully enjoy. For like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, free of the Egyptians and yet not quite into the Promised Land, we too are free from our sins and yet not quite in the land of milk and honey. We are still in a wilderness, full of temptation and sin and death. And the waiting is hard. It was hard for the Israelites. It's hard for us.

Yet, we've seen a glimpse of what that land of milk and honey looks like. St Paul describes it like seeing the firstfruits of the harvest. It's a fitting image for these first days of spring.

You drive out into the countryside and you look at the fields and it's pretty barren right now. There's no corn or beans sprouting the fields quite yet. No hay to bail. No leaves on most of the trees, even.

And yet, there are signs of life all around us. The grass is greening up. The spring flowers are blooming like crazy. And it really won't be much longer now until we're enjoying fresh strawberries and asparagus and sweet peas.

We can't see the big harvest at the end of the summer. But we know it's coming because the firstfruits are already here. The first signs of life and growth are already happening.

That is what the resurrection of Jesus is for a believer. Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. His resurrection tells us that death has been defeated. That there is no power in heaven or on earth that is not under his feet. Because death itself could keep him in the tomb.

So no matter how barren the ground looks. No matter how far away the harvest feels. We know it's coming. And we will be a part of it. *"Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ."*

*"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power... the last enemy to be destroyed is death."* That is what a land of milk and honey looks like. A land reborn.

Because that's what milk and honey symbolize. Those two foods aren't just chosen at random. Milk and honey are symbols of birth. In the ancient world, milk and honey were what you fed a baby before they were able to eat anything else.

A land of milk and honey is a land of rebirth. A creation reborn. Born again of water and the Spirit. Washed in the rebirth of Holy Baptism. Reborn, recreated, regenerated in the Resurrection.

So that we live in Eden once again. So that we live in paradise once again. So that we live in a place where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

The former things were nailed to the cross. They died with Christ. You and your sin died with Christ. So that you might be made new and live in paradise.

God has seen the affliction of his people. He has heard our cry. He knows our sufferings. Because he felt our sufferings on the cross. And in his resurrection he has delivered us. He is bringing us even now into a good and broad land. A land of milk and honey. A land for those reborn and resurrected in his Son. Amen.