

J.D. Ousley
Sermon—1Oct17
Ex 17/Mt 21
“Honestly”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

I have always been amazed at the Bible's *honesty*.

The characters in the Bible are presented warts and all. Scripture doesn't pretend that they were perfect. Their flaws are on display for all to see.

Take today's First Lesson, from the Old Testament. The text describes a miracle that Moses performed while the people of Israel were wandering in the desert. Moses struck a rock, and water came bursting out, so that the people had something to drink.

But the miracle only arrives after the people of Israel complained about how thirsty they were. They didn't trust God to provide for them. They even felt that they would have been better off if they had remained in Egypt as slaves!

Now, remember, this is *Moses* that the people of Israel were complaining about. This is the same Moses who had led the Hebrews across the Red Sea and out of bondage. They owed their freedom to him—and, of course, ultimately, they owed their freedom to God.

Yet still the people of Israel protested. Moses ends up calling the place, “Massah and Meribah”—which are Hebrew words for “quarreling” and “testing.”

And this passage is hardly unique. There are many other places in the Old Testament where we find the people of Israel quarreling with God and putting him to the test.

Then, too, the Gospel for today suggests that Christ's hearers didn't always respond positively to him. The Scripture tells how *Jesus* was confronted as he preached God's word; he offered a parable that reflected the opposition he was encountering.

In Christ's parable, a man has two sons. The man approaches the first and says, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” The son initially refuses, but later he changes his mind and goes off to work.

The father then approaches his second son and asks him to do his job. The son obediently answers, “I go, sir”—but then, for some reason, he decides not to work.

Jesus asks those who were listening to the parable which of the two sons did the will of his father? The crowd answers, “The first.”

Now Jesus must have told this parable because there were men and women among his followers who only talked the game of faith. They eagerly pledged to work for the Kingdom of God--yet instead of keeping their pledge, they ended up doing nothing.

Happily, the parable suggests that there were other disciples who—even though they hesitated to commit themselves when they first heard Christ's challenge--later changed their minds and went off to serve God.

Clearly, it's better to work for the Kingdom than to talk. In fact, the rest of the New Testament contains numerous examples of disciples who quarrel with fellow church members or who otherwise fail to obey the teaching of Jesus.

Yet I think these bad reports paradoxically are *good news*! They are evidence of the Bible's credibility.

Because the Bible reports the failures of religious people along with stories of their faithfulness, we can have confidence that it is telling the whole truth—the unvarnished story of far-from-perfect Jews and Christians who struggled to follow God's will.

Like our ancestors in the faith, we also go through times when our faith is far from perfect. We don't do the things we ought to do. We get angry at the behavior of those around us. We wish God could make them act the way we want them to. We get upset when God doesn't grant our wishes.

Not only do we quarrel with God; we also test him.

Indeed, every *prayer* we offer for a given outcome might be seen as a test. We are looking to see how God will answer that prayer. We're testing whether we're asking for the right thing, and we want to learn how God will respond.

Moses "called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'"

Is the Lord among us or not? As we challenge God to answer our prayers, and as we at Incarnation ask God to lead us into the fall season, we can also expect to *be challenged*. As we test God with our prayers, we can expect to be tested.

That means that, like the Hebrews and the early Christians, we need to be honest with ourselves. We need to admit our mistakes; we have to acknowledge our occasional conflicts and the various weaknesses of our community. If we are honest with ourselves about the present, we can be more faithful in the future.

One test that is now before us is this. We are currently trying to raise money to help rebuilding efforts on the little Caribbean island of Domenica. Domenica is the homeland of two members of our staff.

Many houses and businesses on the island were severely damaged by a recent hurricane. The money we collect will buy food and clothing for the people of Dominica, as well as materials to help them rebuild their homes. I want to thank those of you who have given already, and I want to encourage others who are able to consider a donation.

And as we proceed with this and other outreach projects, it will be useful for us to remember the lesson of Christ's parable: talk is cheap! It is actions that count.

So, too, our actions on behalf of others will speak louder than our words!

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.