

**“Called to Eldership”**  
**Sermon preached by Rev. Laurel Barr**  
**September 28 2008**

**Exodus 17:1-7**

One of the things that I love about living in Sydney is that very quickly you can leave the city and find yourself in the wilderness. Here along the eastern seaboard of Australia, we think of wilderness as those areas that are unspoilt and untamed. Lately we have become all too painfully aware of how these places are disappearing very rapidly. Wilderness for us is something very precious. Some of us dream of escaping the city for a bush walk or a holiday in the wilderness to recharge our batteries.

However on our mainly dry continent we also have some inkling of what the ancient Israelites encountered in the wilderness. As we continue to follow their story in Exodus we find them in wilderness land that is very marginal and desert-like. Life for the biblical writers was concentrated along the rivers and around permanent springs of water\*.

Those who lived in the wilderness were forced to move from one water source to another. They could not settle and rest. The wilderness was seen as a negative place: a wasteland associated with snakes and scorpions and wild animals, drought and darkness. The wilderness meant desolation and aridity and vulnerability. It was a testing place.

And it was here that we find the Israelites in our reading today. They are not finding it easy. Having lived their lives on the Nile delta as slaves being told what to do, they have no experience and skills when it comes to surviving in the desert. And so they murmur and mutter discontentedly among themselves and they outright complain not once or twice but over and over again. And Moses their leader gets the brunt of it.

In the Exodus story a pattern emerges: when the Israelites found themselves trapped between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army they said to Moses “Did you have to bring us out here in the desert to die? It would be better to be slaves in Egypt than to die here in the desert.”

God heard their terrified cries and we know the story of how God parted the Red Sea and saved them from the pursuing Egyptian army.

And God did it again and again: When the only water they could find was too bitter to drink, God showed Moses how to put a special plant into the water to make it sweet enough to drink. When they were starving, God fed them with manna in the morning and quail meat in the evening.

Now they are camped at a place where there is no water. They lash out at their leader Moses “Give us water to drink”. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

Poor Moses! He asks: “Why are you complaining? Why are you putting the Lord to the test?” And as he has done before, he prays earnestly to God for help and God responds again with grace so that the journey can resume: “Go on ahead of the people” God tells Moses “and ... I will be standing there in front of you”. Moses follows God’s instructions and strikes the rock and water flows for the people to drink.

Over and over in the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, God supplies their needs and leads them forward. God’s steadfast love and faithfulness is constant even in those times when the people fail to trust him.

So after the water flows in the desert, Moses says to the people “Is God among us or not?”

And there would be many more times along their journey when the people of Israel become anxious and fearful, and again and again Moses as their leader chides them and nurtures them and encourages them by reminding them of what God has already done for them and that God was with them.

In this incident in the wilderness we see Moses the leader of a people on a journey praying for his people and asking God’s guidance at every step along the way. We also see Moses who asks the “God” questions. Others might do the practical things but Moses pointed the people to God. He asked “What is God doing with us here in this wilderness?” “What is God doing among us in this situation?” Look! “Is God with us or not?”

Today we have commissioned four new elders and here is an important model for what it means to be an elder:

Eldership involves **being** a person of prayer in the community.

Eldership is about **being** the ones who put us in touch with the God who is in our midst. Elders are those who remind us to listen for what God is saying to us, to discern what God is doing among us and where God is calling us to go next.

Eldership is about **being open** to God’s transforming Spirit working in our life and in the life of this community.

According to the Basis of Union the Elder in relationship with the minister of the word, deacons and lay preachers is to be recognized under the guidance of the Holy Spirit “to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock and to share in government and to serve those in need in the world.” In other words elders are central to our whole church community’s identity and mission - and their role in our community is as much about their character and their being as faithful Christians as it is about what they do in practical terms.

And if that sounds daunting, remember that being a leader was not necessarily easy for Moses. He had to grow into it. You may remember when Moses was unexpectedly called by God in the incident

of the burning bush he quickly fired five objections back at God as to why he should not be a leader. But God answered those objections. God promised to be with Moses every step of the way and to give him the words to say and the actions to do in order to accomplish the task. When God calls us into a ministry God also equips us.

But the most important quality that Moses brought to his leadership was being open to the Spirit of God working in him to transform him into the leader God intended for him to be. God promised Moses "I will bring you out".

When Moses prayed earnestly in our story today "God, What can I do with these people?", we see him struggling in the predicament in which he and his people found themselves. But as he encountered situation after situation along his people's journey in the wilderness, God's Spirit worked within him and through him and changed him along the way.

In prayer and in action Moses was open enough to trust God and take the next step, and in this story to go with God to the rock at Horeb or Mount Sinai where the next important stage of the people's journey would take place. There he struck the rock so that life-giving thirst quenching water would flow, and there later he would receive the Covenant on Mount Sinai including the Ten Commandments. When Moses asked that "God" question: "Is the Lord with us or not?" the people could say Of course God is because God has supplied our needs yet again.

Can you see what is happening here? The transformation in Moses' life was intertwined with the transformation of the Israelite's journey. As he trusted and obeyed God, Moses was being transformed step by step in the midst of the people into a leader. You might say in St Paul's terms that Moses was learning what it means to offer himself as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service .....letting God transform him inwardly "

And as Moses pointed his people to God and encouraged them in their life and faith journey, they were also being transformed along with him from a motley ill-disciplined mob of slaves into a cohesive nation who based their life on the Torah. This is an elder providing spiritual oversight: As a Leader, Moses and his people were bound together, all part of the plan of God.

And it is the same for the elders here in Roseville - when we answer the call to be a leader in this church we bind ourselves to God and to this community. As William Willamon puts it "we are commandeered by God and used for purposes greater than ourselves." Ministry of the Word, Lay preaching, and Eldership is demanding because we are no longer free to simply follow our own inclinations and desires. We are bound to others.

Graham, Joan, Margot and Sue you each already offer this community marvelous gifts and abilities and experience. Many of us can affirm this. You are gifts to this community but most importantly as Elders you are gifts to us as persons of prayer, as you prompt us to look for God in our lives and as you are open to allow God to transform you and this faith community.

Elders are at the heart of the congregation. Eldership is profoundly important and never more so than now at this strategic time in our life as a congregation here in Roseville as we move forward.

Earlier in the service when we commissioned our new elders I gave them a little book I have been treasuring lately which is a book of meditations for spiritual life. It is written by Jean Fulcher who is an elder in the Strathfield Uniting Church. Jean is a very humble person and would be embarrassed if she heard me saying that she exemplifies much of what I have been saying. The genesis of the book *Wings of God*\*\* was conceived when Jean was convalescing from a serious illness. She describes it as *a thanksgiving to God* that in a testing time she discovered the goodness of life. Jean has the ability to recognize the presence of God in her everyday life and experiences and to speak about them in a way that others can readily understand.

Somehow through her personal experience, Jean touches our common human experiences including being apprehensive, enjoying creation, belonging, doubting, joy, humility, neighbourliness, worry, pain and suffering, friendship and growing older. In these experiences she finds God present. To Moses' question "Is God among us or not?" Jean gives a resounding yes and encourages others through her deep connectedness with God.

It reminds me of the story I was reading about of another elder in the Bedouin tribe who lived in the Sinai desert :\*\*\*

One night he and a boy huddled around a fire in a cold wind that blew a chill right through their clothes and stirred the sand so that it stung their eyes. The boy cursed the wind. He also asked the old tribesman, "why do the others called you a holy man?".

The tribesman thought a while before he finally answered: *Perhaps it is because I can speak of the things from God. I know that this wind is from God and that in the heat of the day the wind will be a gift. Perhaps my people think I have the gift of God in my heart and on my lips. When times are hard I can speak of God and return God to the hearts of the tribe. Perhaps that is why I am called the holy man.*

#### **Let us pray:**

Let us give thanks for those who in our lives in the past and those amongst us now who are people of prayer and who in challenging times speak of God to us and return God into our hearts and our minds. Let us give thanks for those who have helped us to name God along our journeys of life and who have prodded us to explore faith and to deepen our discipleship of Jesus Christ. Let us give thanks for the Elders of this community..... May God bless us all to his praise and glory. Amen.

#### **Sources:**

\*Alastair Campbell "Wilderness -the place of testing" in *Quiet Spaces - The Wilderness*, The Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford UK, 2006

\*\*Jean Fulcher, *Wings of God*. Pergola Press, Sydney 2007

\*\*\*Emma Loveridge "Sinai Pilgrimage with Wind, Sand and Stars" in *Quiet Spaces -The Wilderness* , The Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford, UK, 2006