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"SWEET AND SOUR CHRISTIANS"

Apr. 17, '83

Exodus 15:22-27

Text:

"And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah.

"And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?

And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them." (Exodus 15:23-25)

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT A GREAT TREK THAT ALWAYS STIRS THE IMAGINATION. THE STORY OF A PEOPLE ON THE MARCH ACROSS HUNDREDS OF MILES OF DESERT, JUNGLE, OR ROLLING COUNTRYSIDE, HUNGRY AND THIRSTY, STUMBLING ON TO SOME DISTANT GOAL, FASCINATES US AT EVERY AGE, AND IS IRRESISTIBLE TO THE MODERN MOVIE-MAKER. ~~Joseph's~~ THE CRUSADES, JOSEPH SMITH LEADING HIS MORMONS TO THE SALT LAKE OF UTAH, THE LONG MARCH OF MAO AND HIS COMMUNISTS, THE DEATH MARCH OF BATAAN -- NO MATTER WHERE OUR SYMPATHIES LIE WE ARE MOVED BY SUCH STORIES OF ADVENTURE AND ENDURANCE -- AND, LET'S ADMIT, GLAD WE WEREN'T THERE.

OF ALL THE LONG TREKS IN THE HUMAN STORY, THERE IS ONE THAT IS INDELIBLY PRINTED IN THE MEMORY OF THE WESTERN WORLD -- THE FORTY-YEAR WANDERING OF THE ISRAELITES AFTER THEIR EXODUS FROM EGYPT. NOT ONLY IS IT A LIVING, HOLY MEMORY FOR THE ENTIRE JEWISH PEOPLE, BUT AT AN EARLY DATE THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH ANNEXED THE STORY AND ALLEGORIZED IT AS A SYMBOL OF THE TREK OF THE CHRISTIAN THROUGH A DIFFICULT AND DANGEROUS WORLD TO THE PROMISED CITY OF GOD. THE PILLAR OF FIRE BY NIGHT AND OF SMOKE BY DAY, THE MANNA FROM HEAVEN, THE SHADOW OF A GREAT ROCK, MOSES AT SINAI WITH THE TABLETS OF THE LAW, THE MEN WHO SPIED OUT THE LAND, JERICHO WITH ITS TUMBLING WALLS -- THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HAVE PILDERED THE ISRAELITES FOR THESE SYMBOLS OF OUR EARTHLY PILGRIMAGE, AND EVEN TODAY'S SCRIPTURAL ILLITERATES ARE VAGUELY FAMILIAR WITH THEM ALL. (LIKE THE STUDENT WHO WAS ASKED IF HE HAD READ "EXODUS" AND WHO REPLIED: "NO, BUT I'VE SEEN THE MOVIE.")

SO HERE I AM, STEALING A STORY FROM THE HEBREW RECORDS, AND TALKING TO YOU ABOUT SWEET AND SOUR CHRISTIANS ON THE BASIS OF THIS STORY OF THE WATERS OF MARAH.

THERE THEY WERE, THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL, FOOTSORE AND WEARY ON ONE OF THE WORST LAPS OF THEIR JOURNEY, THREE DAYS INTO THE DESERT OF SHUR, AND WITH ONE THOUGHT ON THEIR MINDS -- WATER. THE WORD GOES 'ROUND, "THERE'S A STREAM AHEAD -- THE WATERS OF MARAH!" WATER. THE WORD WOULD RUN THROUGH THE LINES. FOR AT LEAST A MOMENT OR TWO, THE BICKERING AND SNARLING AT MOSES WOULD STOP. WE CAN SEE THE MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN FORGETTING THEIR WEARY LEGS AND RUSHING FORWARD TO THE GLISTENING WATERS. THEN CAME ANOTHER WORD - MARAH - AND THE CROWD SLOWS DOWN TO A GRUMBLING HALT. FOR MARAH MEANS BITTER, UNDRINKABLE. LET ME TELL YOU, IF ANYTHING IS WORSE THAN THE AGONIES OF THIRST ON THE LONG MARCH, IT'S THE MIRAGE, THE PROMISE OF WATER THAT SUDDENLY VANISHES.

THAT WAS THE SOUR DAY FOR MARCHING ISRAELITES. SO SOUR THAT THIS WRITER SAYS THEY CALLED THAT RIVER MARAH EVER AFTER. SO NATURALLY MOSES IS THE TARGET AGAIN: "AND THE PEOPLE MURMURED AGAINST MOSES, SAYING, WHAT SHALL WE DRINK?" MOSES, WHO COULD BE SOUR ON THESE OCCASIONS, ROARING BACK AT THE CROWD THAT THEY DESERVED ALL THEY GOT, WAS, ON THIS OCCASION, UNEXPECTEDLY SWEET. HE SAID NOTHING IN ANSWER AND WENT DIRECTLY TO HEADQUARTERS: "HE CRIED UNTO THE LORD, AND THE LORD SHOWED HIM A TREE." A TREE? I CAN JUST SEE MOSES -- AS BAFFLED AS WE ARE WHEN THE LORD SEEMS TO GIVE A TOTALLY IRRELEVANT ANSWER TO OUR PRAYER. BUT THIS WAS A TREE WHICH, WE ARE TOLD, "WHEN CAST INTO THE WATERS, THE WATERS WERE MADE SWEET." AND THE LITTLE STORY ENDS HAPPILY WITH THE WORD FROM ON HIGH: "I AM THE LORD THAT HEALETH THEE."

FOR THOSE WHO DON'T LIKE TO TAKE THEIR MIRACLES NEAT, I WOULD REMARK THAT THERE ARE, INDEED, SUCH TREES THAT HAVE BEEN, AND STILL ARE, USED TO MAKE SOUR WATER SWEET IN THESE DESERT AREAS. MOSES, AS USUAL, KNEW MORE ABOUT THE TRICKS OF THE SHEPHERDS AND NOMADS THAN THESE CITY SLAVES HE WAS LEADING THROUGH THE WILDERNESS. BUT THE BIBLE IS, AS ALWAYS, CONCERNED TO SHOW THE HANDS OF GOD IN THE ADVENTURES OF HIS PEOPLE: "I AM THE LORD THAT HEALETH THEE." IT'S GOOD TO KNOW THE HEALING FORCES OF NATURE WHICH ARE, AFTER ALL, AT THE ROOTS OF THE PRACTICE OF MEDICINE, BUT IT'S ALSO GOOD TO KNOW THAT BEHIND THEM ALL IS THE HEALING GOD, THE ONE WHO CAN MAKE THE SICK WHOLE, AND THE SOUR SWEET. THE GOD OF THE BIBLE IS THE HEALING GOD, THE GOD, SHALL WE SAY, WHO IS ON THE SIDE OF THE SWEET AGAINST THE SOUR?

NOW WE COME BACK FROM MARAH TO SAN DIEGO. ANYONE READING MY TITLE, "SWEET AND SOUR CHRISTIANS" MIGHT EXPECT TO HEAR A

SERMON ABOUT TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE WHO CALL THEMSELVES CHRISTIANS -- THE SWEET, ATTRACTIVE, HAPPY, CARING ONES, AND THE SOUR, DISAPPROVING, DISGRUNTLED, AND COMPLAINING ONES. SUCH A SERMON WOULD BE TOO EASY TO COMPOSE AND DANGEROUS TO PREACH FOR, AREN'T WE ALL CONVINCED THAT, FOR THE MOST PART, WE ARE SWEET CHRISTIANS (IF NOBODY TELLS US THAT NOW THEY CERTAINLY WILL WHEN WE DIE), AND WOULDN'T WE ALL START THINKING ABOUT CERTAIN SOUR CHRISTIANS WE COULD NAME? WHAT I HAVE IN MIND IS SOMETHING QUITE DIFFERENT. WHAT I HEAR IN THIS BIBLICAL STORY IS THE STORY OF OUR ^{TREK} ~~TREK~~ OUR PILGRIMAGE AS CHRISTIANS, THROUGH A WORLD THAT ^{OFFERS} ~~PRESENTS~~ A BAFFLING MIXTURE OF THE SWEET AND THE SOUR. I AM THINKING OF ST. PAUL, NOT INVITING YOU TO CLASSIFY HIM AS EITHER A SWEET CHRISTIAN OR A SOUR (OPINION IS DIVIDED, I IMAGINE, ON THAT POINT -- AND I DON'T FIND EITHER ADJECTIVE APPROPRIATE -- CERTAINLY NOT "SWEET" IN THE HYMN-WRITERS' SENSE OF THE WORD, BUT NOT "SOUR" I'D SETTLE FOR "TOUGH," OR HARD-BITTEN") BUT AS A CHRISTIAN WHO KNEW HOW TO COPE WITH THE SWEET AND THE SOUR IN DAILY EXPERIENCE. "I KNOW WHAT IT IS TO BE BROUGHT LOW," HE WRITES, "AND I KNOW WHAT ~~IT IS~~ IT IS TO HAVE PLENTY. I HAVE BEEN VERY THOROUGHLY INITIATED INTO THE HUMAN LOT WITH ALL ITS UPS AND DOWNS -- FULLNESS AND HUNGER, PLENTY AND WANT." THEN COMES THE CLINCHER WHICH COULD HAVE BEEN THE TEXT OF THIS SERMON: "I HAVE STRENGTH FOR ANYTHING THROUGH HIM WHO GIVES ME POWER."

THIS IS THE TIME OF THE YEAR WHEN OUR CHRISTIAN ^{Journey} ~~TREK~~ BEGINS TO RESEMBLE, AT TIMES, THAT DREARY STRETCH THE ISRAELITES WENT THROUGH IN THE WILDERNESS OF SHUR. THE FESTIVITIES OF CHRISTMAS, AND THE NEW YEAR HAVE PASSED AND THERE WASN'T MUCH SPIRITUAL LIFT FOR US UNTIL THE EASTER TRUMPETS SOUNDED. SO BETWEEN THE NEW YEAR AND EASTER WE WERE IN WHAT MAY BE CALLED "ORDINARY TIME." [BY MARKING OFF ORDINARY TIME FROM THE FEASTS, SOLEMNITIES, AND SPECIAL SEASONS, THE CHURCH IS ADMITTING TO A KIND OF REALISM ABOUT GOD'S TIME. WE DO NOT ALWAYS HAVE TO FEEL WE ARE CAUGHT UP IN SOME JET-STREAM OF SACRED TIME. WE OFTEN HAVE TO SLOG IT OUT, TO BURROW ALONG IN THE DRAB AND BANAL EVENTS OF OUR CHRISTIAN LIVES.... ORDINARY TIME IS FILLED WITH WORK AND WEDDINGS, WITH STUDY AND SLAVING, WITH FORGETTING AND NOT HAVING A SECOND TO THINK. A LOT OF ORDINARY TIME GOES INTO COMMITTEE WORK. ORDINARY TIME IS SPENT TICK-BY-TOCK, WITHOUT THE HIGH THAT ACCOMPANIES OUR SPECIAL SEASONS. THERE IS LITTLE ROMANCE AND EVEN LESS FRENZY TO IT. SOME PEOPLE LIVE THEIR WHOLE LIVES IN ORDINARY TIME.]

YES; IT'S THE SWEET AND THE SOUR OF ORDINARY TIME THAT WE HAVE

TO DEAL WITH. THERE ARE DAYS WHEN WE ARE IN THE WILDERNESS OF SHUR, PLODDING ON, BELIEVING THAT IT DOESN'T LAST FOREVER. THERE ARE DAYS WHEN EVEN THAT BELIEF IS BARELY SUSTAINED BY THE PRAYER AND WORSHIP TO WHICH WE LOOK FOR THE WATER OF LIFE, FOR EVEN THAT WATER HAS FOR US GONE SOUR. THAT CAN BE THE GREATEST TRIAL OF ALL FOR THE CHRISTIAN WHO TAKES HIS RELIGION SERIOUSLY. WHAT CAN BE MORE SHATTERING THAN TO RUSH LIKE THESE ISRAELITES TO THE WATER OF LIFE AND FIND IT SOUR, FLAT, OR UNDRINKABLE? AT SUCH A TIME, WE FIND LITTLE HELP IN BRIGHT TALK ABOUT SILVER LININGS, OR EVEN TEXTS THAT SEEM TO PROMISE GOD'S IMMEDIATE RESPONSE. "YOU READ AT THE FUNERAL ABOUT GOD BEING WITH US, EVEN IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH," SAID A WIDOW TO ME NOT LONG AGO, "BUT I DON'T FEEL IT AT ALL." MARAH, MARAH. MARAH. TIME STRETCHES OUT AHEAD AND IT IS BITTER, EMPTY, A DESERT.

WHAT DOES A CHRISTIAN DO WITH SUCH AN EXPERIENCE OF THE SOUR? TWO PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS COME TO ME WHICH CAN HELP ANY OF US TO STAY ON COURSE. THE FIRST IS THE SIMPLE ONE, THAT COUNTLESS OTHERS HAVE BEEN THIS WAY BEFORE. I AM NOT THINKING JUST OF GREAT PERSONALITIES LIKE MOSES OR ST. PAUL, BUT PEOPLE WE KNOW. BEHIND A SWEET COUNTENANCE AND A CHEERFUL SMILE, MANY OF OUR CHRISTIAN FRIENDS ARE TASTING THE SOUR MORE OFTEN THAN WE KNOW. WE ARE NOT ALONE WHEN SUCH TIMES COME. AND THE SECOND THOUGHT FLOWS FROM THIS. WE ARE NOT UNIQUE AS CHRISTIANS IN, ON OCCASION, FINDING OUR VERY FAITH GO SOUR. ONE TOUCH OF THE SOUR IN THE DESERT DOESN'T INDICATE THAT WE HAVE BEEN KIDDING OURSELVES AND ARE NOT REALLY BELIEVING CHRISTIANS AT ALL. STILL LESS DOES IT MEAN THAT WE ARE BEING PUNISHED FOR SOME LAPSE FROM OUR CHRISTIAN DUTIES. IN OUR PRAYERS WE NEED TO REMEMBER THAT OUR TIME IS NOT GOD'S TIME, AND THAT OUR GOD IS NOT TO BE SUMMONED UP LIKE A WAITER, WITH A FLICK OF THE HAND. THE BIBLE TELLS US TO "WAIT ON THE LORD." IT DOESN'T SAY THAT HE IS TO WAIT ON US.

IF WE KEEP SUCH THOUGHTS IN MIND, WE ARE READY FOR THAT HEALING TOUCH, THAT BRANCH THAT GOD THROWS INTO THE BITTER WATERS TO MAKE THEM SWEET. THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE IS THAT WHICH MOSES HEARD: "I AM THE LORD THAT HEALETH THEE." GOD IS ON THE SIDE OF THE SWEET. THAT IS THE MEANING OF THESE MOMENTS OF GRACE THAT MYSTERIOUSLY OCCUR RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DESERT. MOSES KNEW IT BY THE WATERS OF MARAH. ST. PAUL KNEW IT. THAT LETTER HE WROTE TO THE PHILIPPIANS WAS FROM HIS PRISON IN ROME, BY THAT TIME, HE HAD EXPECTED TO BE ON HIS WAY TO SPAIN WITH THE GOSPEL, BUT GOD HAD GIVEN THIS DESERT STRETCH IN PRISON -- AND HE HAD NO IDEA WHETHER

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HE WOULD EVER EMERGE ALIVE. WHAT STIMULATED THIS LETTER WAS THE SUDDEN ARRIVAL IN HIS PRISON OF THE EQUIVALENT OF A RED CROSS PARCEL -- A PACKET OF FOOD AND A LOVING LETTER FROM THE CONGREGATION AT PHILIPPI. LIFE WAS POSSIBLY AT ITS SOUREST AND DRABBEST WHEN THE GIFT ARRIVED. HE WRITES HIS THANKS, BUT HE CAN'T RESIST ADDING THAT, FOR HIM, A SUDDEN FLASH OF THE SWEET WAS NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING. "IT IS A GREAT JOY TO ME, IN THE LORD THAT AFTER SO LONG YOUR CARE FOR ME HAS BLOSSOMED AGAIN, NOT THAT I AM ALLUDING TO WANT," HE GOES ON, "FOR I HAVE LEARNED TO FIND RESOURCES WITHIN MYSELF WHATEVER MY CIRCUMSTANCES. "PAUL COULD TAKE THE SWEET AND THE SOUR FOR, AS HE SAID, "I HAVE STRENGTH FOR ANYTHING THROUGH HIM WHO GIVES ME POWER."

WE KNOW WHO THAT WAS. FOR THE RELIETY OF THE HEALING GOD HAS COME GLORIOUSLY INTO THE DESERT PATCHES OF OUR ~~WATERS~~ IN THE LIFE AND DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST. IN THE WATERS OF JORDAN HE IDENTIFIED HIMSELF WITH US. HE WAS THE HEALING BRANCH THROWN INTO THE WATERS. AS WE ARE UNITED TO HIM BY BAPTISM, SO WE EXPERIENCE THE POWER THAT FLOWS FROM THAT SOUR CROSS AND THAT GLORIOUS RESURRECTION.

MOSES, PAUL, JESUS. IS IT ALL A TALE OF LONG AGO? HARDLY A WEEK PASSES RIGHT HERE WITHOUT MY HEARING AND SEEING THAT THIS HEALING GOD IS STILL AT WORK, THAT THIS POWER OF CHRIST IS THAT "RESOURCE IN MYSELF WHATEVER MY CIRCUMSTANCES." IF WE REST OUR TRUST IN HIM "WHATEVER THE CIRCUMSTANCES -- EVEN IN THOSE BITTER MOMENTS IN THE DESERT -- THE HEALING GRACE WILL COME -- NOT IN OUR TIME BUT GOD'S ONE OF THE HAPPIEST LETTERS I HAVE RECEIVED RECENTLY WAS FROM THE VERY PERSON WHO HAD FOUND GOD SO DISMALLY ABSENT AT A TIME OF NEED.

*Well done,
good and faithful
servant.*

Matthew 25:21



MORNING WORSHIP SERVICE

November 8, 1987

10:30 AM

PREPARATION OF OUR HEARTS FOR WORSHIP

"Let the people be in silent meditation and prayer upon entering the sanctuary."

WE PRAISE GOD

ORGAN PRELUDE

CHORAL INTROIT "All People of God" Chancel Choir

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HYMN OF PRAISE No. 379

"Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing"

CALL TO WORSHIP

Pastor: O give thanks to the Lord,
call on His name,
make known His deeds among the peoples!

People: Sing to Him, sing praises to Him,
tell of all His wonderful works!

Pastor: Glory is His holy name;
let the hearts of those
who seek the Lord rejoice!

People: Seek the Lord and His strength,
seek His presence continually!

WE CONFESS OUR SINS

PRAVER OF CONFESSION (In Unison)

O God of mercy, You sent Jesus Christ to save lost men. Judge us with love, and lift the burden of our sins. We confess that we are twisted by pride. We see ourselves pure when we are stained and great when we are small. We have failed in love, forgotten to be just, and have turned away from Your truth. Have mercy, O God, and forgive our sins, for the sake of Jesus, Your Son, our Savior. Amen.

DECLARATION OF PARDON

*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH "The Apostles' Creed" Pg. 12

WE GIVE THANKS TO GOD

ANTHEM "Praise the Lord" by Handel Chancel Choir

PRAVER OF THANKSGIVING

Pastor: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them to the Lord.

Pastor: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: It is right to give Him thanks and praise.

Pastor: Let us pray.

PASTORAL PRAYER

CHORAL RESPONSE "In This Quiet Moment"

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RITUAL OF FRIENDSHIP "What A Friend"

GIVING OF TITHES AND OFFERINGS

OFFERTORY MUSIC Chancel Choir

"Elijah Rock" by Jester Hairston

*DOXOLOGY "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow"

OFFERTORY PRAYER

THREEFOLD AMEN

GOD SPEAKS TO US

SCRIPTURE Exodus 15: 22-27

MUSICAL SELECTION Chancel Choir

"Bound For Jubilee" by Joyce Eilers

SERMON "Sweet & Sour Christians" Rev. George W. Smith

*INVITATIONAL HYMN "I Am Thine, O Lord" No. 320

*BENEDICTION

CHORAL BENEDICTION "God Be With You"

ORGAN POSTLUDE

* Congregation standing
++++ Worshipers are seated

TO OUR GUESTS - You are welcome to our Worship Service and all activities of the Church. Please help us to know you by signing a record of attendance card. You are invited to meet with others in the Fellowship Hall for refreshments. Please come again and invite your friends and neighbors to come with you.

ELDERS Yvonne Johnson and Joe Littlejohn will be at the front of the sanctuary during the Invitational Hymn.

THE FLOWERS FOR TODAY were placed in the sanctuary by Mrs. Loma Johnson to commemorate her husband Mack's birthday.

HOSTING THE FELLOWSHIP HOUR will be Mrs. Loma Johnson.

CHRIST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF SAN DIEGO

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Chancel Choir Director:

Mrs. DOLORES STEVENS

Youth Choir Director:

Mr. KENNEDY JONES

Youth Choir Pianist:

Ms. JUANITA DENTHAM

Organist:

Ms. JUANITA DENTHAM

Pianist, Church School:

Mr. MARCUS BROWN

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