Sunday, March 27, 2011: Exodus 17:1-7

# Why not lead these refugees directly to safety, milk and honey? Why the desert, the wandering, the long years so far from home?

by Matthew Myer Boulton in the March 22, 2011 issue

Translated literally, the Spanish word *desahogarse* means "to undrown oneself." It refers to disclosing a story of grief or difficulty in a way that liberates the teller, or at least lightens her load. Have you traveled for days across the Sonoran Desert, skirting the barbed-wired walls and the border patrol, risking your life for the sake of your family back home, all in the hope of landing work that pays more than a few dollars a day? Then rest here awhile; tell me your story. Undrown yourself. There isn't much water out there in the wilderness, God knows, but there are plenty of ways to be swallowed up by sorrow.

We've heard of the exodus, that great escape out of slavery; we've heard of the promised land, that home of milk of honey; and we've heard of the wilderness wandering that comes in between. But for the author of Exodus 17, the desert chapter in Israel's history is more than a 40-year interlude between the drama's beginning and end; it's a full-blown second act in its own right. In fact, it's arguably the center of the story.

In Act I, for example, as the Egyptian plagues come and go, God repeatedly instructs Moses to demand that the pharaoh "let my people go"—not "so they may enjoy the land of milk and honey," but "so they may worship me in the wilderness" (Exod. 7:16). The point is to worship God; the eventual arrival at the promised land is more the denouement than the climax of Israel's liberating adventure.

But if the point is to lead Israel out into a harsh, uninhabitable land—what's the big idea? Why not lead these refugees directly to safety, milk and honey? Why the desert, the wandering, the long years so far from home?

In a word: training. Exercise. Formation. God visits Egypt with ten plagues, but then visits the Israelites with trials meant to form them, strengthen them, prepare them for Sinai and ultimately for Zion. One of the first and most famous trials is an experience of hunger, followed by the work of trust and poise necessary to gather only one day's worth of manna at a time (Exod. 16)—something Christians should recall every time we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Exodus is a story of liberation, but one of the central themes is that liberation takes time, training and a whole lot of practice.

Another way of putting this is that the liberty God has in mind for us is holistic liberty: not only freedom from concrete, external injustice and oppression, but also freedom from false confidence, from grasping anxiety—and above all, from distrust in God.

Deuteronomy's version of the story makes this explicit: by "letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna," God humbled the people of Israel, forming and reforming them so they might personally, viscerally "understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3). Jesus cites this verse during his own 40-day recapitulation of Israel's years in the desert, during his own personal, visceral, humbling preparation for his ministry (Matt. 4:4).

The key theme of the wilderness-wandering narratives, then, is spiritual formation. Immediately following the trial of hunger comes its companion: a trial of thirst. True to form (again, it's a 40-year training program), the people complain bitterly, stomping their feet and bringing charges against Moses.

Moses immediately names the underlying issue—"Why do you test the Lord?"—which is to say, "Why do you ask, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" But the people will have none of it, pressing Moses with sarcasm: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

The question is at once adolescent and, given the circumstances, completely understandable—and that's just it. The difficult work of spiritual maturation cannot be carried out through talk, study or even excellent preaching and worship alone, though each of these can and must play its part. Christian discipleship ultimately comes down to life experience and actual practice—that is, to various forms of hunger and thirst lived out as opportunities to trust God, follow God and call on God

to provide the nourishment we need.

The notion that our own needs, difficulties and trials may be occasions for spiritual formation is a dangerous idea; it can be misused as an excuse to pursue or prolong suffering. Used wisely and well, however, the idea is indispensable for life in the wilderness, and it deserves to be featured in Christian preaching, teaching and conversation. In short, the good news of Exodus 17 is that despite appearances, water does flow in the desert—and by the grace and guidance of God, not only that sweet spring but also our thirst itself may help us grow into the people we are meant to be.

This is good news for every migrant, every man or woman who ventures across deserts in search of a better life. But it is also good news for everyone else, and perhaps especially for those of us who don't typically think of ourselves as migrants.

In truth, that is exactly who we are: wilderness wanderers, children in formation, pilgrims on the way. More than anything, we need to sit down with one another, tell our stories, undrown ourselves—and learn the slow, difficult, daily work of living out our struggles as occasions for trust in the One who has led us this far and will lead us home.