

"ARRIVAL AT ELIM"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
July 17, 1988

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### INTRODUCTION

If you have any poetry left in you after all of these hot, humid and sticky days we've been having, you may feel a bit of a lift in these words from the Book of Exodus regarding some weary marchers of Israel on the hot, dusty roads of a desert,

"And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees...."

### DEVELOPMENT

Springs of cool, refreshing water. The shade of seventy palm trees. It sounds delightful. Everybody gets tired sometimes. And sometimes that tiredness is in the body, sometimes in the mind, sometimes deeper in the heart. On one occasion when it seemed that the weight of the world was resting on her, Julia Ward Howe slumped down in a chair and remarked that she was tired...."tired down into the future".

We've all had moments like that..."tired down into the future". And it's well for us to remember at such times that we're not really ourselves, that we're apt to say and do things that we wouldn't normally do. We end up losing our perspective. Morale sags. We're out of sorts with ourselves and with others.

Sometimes that sort of tiredness affects a body of people. It gets into a blood stream of a group. It spreads like an epidemic. We see it illustrated in these people coming out of Egypt long ago. They were not themselves. We read that "the people murmured against Moses". Against Moses! Against the very man (as we saw last week) who led them out of slavery, and set them on the road to freedom.

Those long years of slavery had apparently taken a toll on their spiritual energies...on their vision and their hope for the future. They seemed to tire quickly and became easily disheartened every time they faced a challenge. They grumbled among themselves, suggesting that they should turn back. And then when the wilderness yielded little in the way of food, they grumbled. When they came to Marah and stopped to drink its brackish waters, they spit out and grumbled. Always there was that tone of irritability, that feeling that "we'd rather be slaves in Egypt than free, dead men out in the wilderness".

Then right in the midst of all that bickering, confusion and hot, sweaty marching comes this lovely verse, like an oasis in the desert - which it was:

"And they came to Elim...where there were twelve wells of water, and three score and ten palm trees...and they encamped there by the water."

Picture the scene in your mind's eye. Cool shade. Green grass. Rest. Somehow it renews your faith in the goodness and mercy of God.

### MUCH IN COMMON

Now I think we have certain things in common with these ancient marchers. We, too, are part of a moving and marching people - tired and restless, too. There's a weariness in the air. Our daily speech is not without words like stress, pressure, tension, strain. Life can grind us down, and wear us out. The push and pace can leave us weary and exhausted.

There are several kinds of tiredness, several branches of weariness and you can trace them on that hot and dusty road travelled by the weary Israelites just as clearly as on our own.

EXHAUSTION First-off, there's the tiredness of physical exhaustion. It's familiar to us all, but by no means easy to explain. What is tiredness? And when you're tired, what is it that gets tired?

The dictionary suggests that it's the "depletion of energy. The exhaustion of strength". We're familiar with it and we don't really need a dictionary to describe it, nor a doctor to tell us when it comes. We drive our muscles and our minds. We over-tax our energies. After a while a kind of disintegration sets in, a defense mechanism that nature itself automatically sets up against further effort until the resources of energy can be replenished.

Bob Hope once re-counted his day's activities in this fashion. He said that his heart beat 103,368 times and his blood travelled 168 miles, that he breathed 23,040 times and inhaled 438 cubic feet of air. He ate three and one-fourth pounds of food and drank two pounds of liquid. He perspired one half-pint. He generated 450 tons of energy. He spoke 4800 words and moved 750 muscles, and exercised seven million brain cells. And then with a sigh he said, "Boy...am I ever tired."

I think we respond to the text. We understand it and are familiar with this kind of weariness. After months of marching across hot, desert land, they came to the wells of water and the palm trees of Elim. And there is one of the cures for tiredness: rest, relaxation, restoration - palm trees, grass, water. A letting up and a letting go...

There's an affinity between water and earth and our bodies. It's a good thing to have water near by - a boat on it, a fishing rod in it. It's good to walk on something other than hot concrete - to walk on soft, green grass or on pine needles. To swing a tennis racquet or to drive a golf ball. Tolstoy, it was once written, use to plow the fields in his bare feet so that he could draw strength from the earth. I love to look at the ocean...to watch the waves come rolling in...to watch something that moves without my having to push it.

We need to find our way to Elim more often than we do - to make use of nature's restorative powers. There is a real connection between green pastures, still waters and a renewed, healthy soul.

FRUSTRATION However, tiredness is not physical exhaustion alone. You can fix that with rest and a change of scenery. There are also some intense emotional factors involved in restlessness and fatigue. In these murmurings of those ancient Israelites, you can trace another kind of tiredness - not physical exhaustion, but the tiredness of frustration.

It's the kind of weariness that comes from prolonged waiting, delayed hope and disappointment. With hopes soaring, they had started off singing and marching to the Promised Land. One good battle and that would do it; they'd be there. One daring leap of faith and their troubles would be gone forever. There was the monotony of it. The daily demands. The sun beating down on them. This dusty road was proving to be no highway to Utopia...desert and more desert in front of them. Where was this Promised Land - flowing with milk and honey? And the sun was so hot and they were thirsty.

The trouble with life, Dorothy Sayers once said, is that it's "everlastingly daily". The weariness of keeping at it. The monotony of that long road. The frustration of the delayed hope. And the truth slowly sinks in that there are no permanent victories. You win today and may have to fight the same ol' battle again tomorrow. That road leading to the Promised Land is a bit tougher than we figured it would be.

This kind of tiredness cannot be cured by a physical rest. Another kind of response is called for - one that touches the spirit and helps to renew it. A renewal of moral courage...the kind of courage of which the Bible is full...that expects frustration yet keeps on patiently believing and doing battle. That resists all temptation to feel sorry for ourselves or to give up the battle because the road is tough.

At such times we need to "wait on the Lord"...to renew our spiritual perspective, to see life from "higher ground", to keep on "fighting the good fight" as the words of the hymn put it.

Lord Randolph Churchill, father of Sir Winston Churchill, wrote to his wife in 1891 that in all probability more than 2/3rds of his life was now over. He said he would not spend the remainder of his years beating his head against a stone wall. There had been nothing apparently but abuse and misunderstanding. He was tired of it all and would not continue in public life any longer. We can understand that feeling. We've heard people in public life, and yes...even in church life...saying something like this, "I've had it....I'm tired of it all..."

And the chances are we've had the feeling and said the same thing, but somehow we're glad that Moses didn't "throw in the towel"...or quit...or that Winston Churchill didn't feel that way back in the forties when England was just about down and out. If ever a people were weary and discouraged and low on hope and ready to quit, the English people were. But remember how Churchill rallied a tired and exhausted people with those magnificent words and lifting spirit,

"We shall fight them on the beaches...we shall fight them in the streets...we shall never surrender".

We all have our low moments when we feel ready to throw in the towel, and then you hear or read something and your spirit is lifted. "They that wait upon the Lord" said Isaiah, "shall renew their strength...they shall mount up with wings as eagles....run and not be weary...walk and not faint".

Remember that delightful story of the two frogs that fell into a can of cream? They thrashed around, trying to hop out of it and they couldn't quite make it. Finally, one frog got tired and give up the fight. "What's the use of it" he said, and with that he flipped his flippers in one last sigh of despair and sank...down to the bottom. The other frog, however, was made of sterner stuff. "I may not make it" said he, "I, too, may go down, but at least I'll go down kicking" And so he kept on kicking and churned the cream into butter. And then with his feet on a chunk of butter, he leaped out.

It really doesn't matter what the fight is - whether it's for health or career - for faith, character, business, a decent world, a stronger church on this location...the pessimistic attitude is the one thing that has no place,

against which we must guard. Remember the words of Jesus, "All things are possible to him who believes".

ONE FINAL WORD

Finally, I believe that people can stand almost anything so long as they believe that what they're doing makes sense, that it has meaning and purpose, that they'll eventually arrive.

They may get tired in it, but never of it. They can bounce back and stay with it as long as they know it's adding up to something. But when faith in God begins to go, hope goes with it, because life is left without the one thing out of which hope springs - the divine purposefulness of life.

You can trace it there in the murmurings of these marchers of old - unbelief and the growing fear that perhaps...they had been taken in, deceived, that the road wasn't leading anywhere. It was a Dead End, there was no Promised Land, nor any God to make one. Maybe...this Moses person was a fool. And God? A delusion? A mirage. And this unbelief took the very heart out of them.

In one of George Moore's novels, he tells of Irish peasants back in the Great Depression who were put to work by the government of Ireland building roads. For a time the men worked well and they were glad to be at work again. They swung their picks and sang their Irish songs, but little by little, they sensed that these roads were leading no where, that they ran out into dreary bogs and stopped. And as the truth gradually dawned on them that the roads were pointless, that they had been put to work solely to provide employment and an excuse for feeding them, the men grew listless, leaned on their shovels and stopped singing and started to murmur. For people to work well and to sing well, there must be a goal and an end in sight.

There is a direct connection between the loss of faith in divine purpose and much of the current restlessness and uncertainty and despair about the future. We seem to have lost a sense of direction, a sense of mission and the sense of divine leadership along the road of life.

CLOSING

As I see it, I believe we'll be Christian a little while longer, and string along with the believers, with those who in spite of appearances believe that there is a purpose behind it all and that what we're all about does add up to something significant, that we're not alone on this road of life. For me, Christ helps me to make sense of it all. And I'd be a pessimist, too, were it not for Him. He never did lose faith in people. He never lost His faith in the future. He keeps me believing in people, in the future, in myself, in the future of the Christian enterprise. He gives us all the answers to life.

And so let us go with Paul who said it so well in his Letter to the Galatians "Let us not be weary in our well doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not".

PRAYER

Help us, Lord, to hear above all voices, the voice that calls us to battle for abiding values and lasting truth. We are not here to dream, to drift. We are not here to have peace of mind. There is work to do and there are loads to lift. Help us now to wait on thee this hour that our strength - physical, mental and spiritual - may be renewed with the sense of Your living presence on the road of life. May that be for us like the springs and palm tress of Elim. Amen.

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