

Reflection for August 4, 2021

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The first reading for today from the Book of Numbers reminds me of the situation in South Sudan. But first a bit of context. This book is the story of God's people about a year after they miraculously crossed the Red Sea, fleeing Egypt where they had been for over 400 years. After this saving action of God through Moses, they spent a year near Mt. Sinai and received the ten commandments. They were on their way to the Promised Land, but the journey was long and arduous.

God, through the prophet Moses, told the people to send men, one prince from each tribe, to reconnoiter the land of Canaan which God was to give to the people. The band of men returned after 40 days to tell the people, that the land was indeed flowing with milk and honey. But there were fierce tribes, too strong to engage. They described them as "giants." They gave a disparaging report to the people telling them that the land of Canaan was a land that would consume them. The people lost trust in God to lead them into the Promised land and began to grumble against God. "Let us appoint a leader to take us back to Egypt."

God lost patience with those who spoke out against him and told them they would spend the next 40 years wandering in the desert. The rest of the book of Numbers is the story of how they organized themselves, solved disputes and ultimately entered the Promised Land. It is also the story of Moses and his prophetic leadership, as well as his relationship with God, as he interceded for the people on many occasions.

The effort to forge a nation out of many tribes is the story of South Sudan. Soon after independence in 2011, tribal hostilities, which had been set aside during 50 years of conflict against the Khartoum government in the North, emerged in late 2013. An all-out civil war between the two dominant tribes of the President and the Vice-President consumed the nation. This meant that energy for building the nation was diverted into fighting an unwinnable war. The Churches have spoken out continually urging a peaceful resolution. Pope Francis invited the leaders of the warring factions to Rome for a time of reflection and negotiations. At the conclusion of the time, in a shocking act of peace-making, he knelt and kissed the feet of the leaders. At this time a shaky cease fire is in place and negotiations continue to bring fragmented groups to the table. These negotiations are happening in Rome under the auspices of the Community of San Egidio, a Catholic community committed to assisting groups to make peace. God has spoken through his prophets.

While peace at the national level seems to be making slow progress, sub-national conflict continues as different ethnic groups engage in conflict over land, cows and

women. Many are left homeless; women are raped, and young people kidnapped. The need for peaceful interventions on the part of Church leaders has never been more necessary.

The responsorial psalm reminds us of how easy it is to break the relationship we have with our God, be it the people of Israel, the people of South Sudan or for our own community here in the US, in Michigan and in Monroe. God wants to be with us, to lead us into the future Promised land, but we must listen more intently to what God is saying through the prophetic voices of those close to God, those interceding for us with God.

The Gospel is the story of a woman of faith from the land of Canaan. She, like Moses, is interceding for her daughter and she is persistent in her appeal, as was Moses for the people of Israel. Let us, too, persist in intercession for God's people who today struggle in so many ways: for those infected by COVID 19; for those hesitating to be vaccinated and who thus put all of us at risk; for those impacted by floods, fires, war, oppression, racism and ways in which people are "othered." Let us be inclusive, compassionate, merciful, forgiving and loving just as our God is with us. Let us be the prophetic presence and prophetic voice echoing what we have learned from listening to our loving and merciful God.