Lord, you have been our refuge

From one generation to another

Before the mountains were brought forth,

Or the land and earth were born,

From age to age you are God.

I was almost finished with everything I had been given to do by the Commission on Ministry toward becoming a candidate for Holy Orders. I’d completed my course work and I was just about done with my field education. I was expecting to be ordained in four months.

Then, an argument started in the parish where I was an employee and doing my field ed. Now in healthy parishes like St John’s and St Andrew’s, folks would have expressed their disagreements and moved on. But this parish had a really dysfunctional system and a long history of dreadful conflicts – most of them between various factions of the parish and the priest-- that had decimated its membership from about 600 to about 150. An argument there was a disaster in which everyone behaved badly and one in which I as a seminarian and employee somehow kept being seen as a representative of the rector they were mad with (for those in that circle) or a representative of someone who wasn’t the rector (for those who swarmed in to protect their rector. To make matters worse, the chairman of my lay committee and the rector began arguing with each other about what parts of my duties the lay committee had a right to comment on and which ones were reserved to the rector. To make a long story short, my lay committee rebelled, refusing to fill out the right forms for the commission on ministry and writing outrageous things on the forms they did fill out. When I got to the commission expecting to receive the green light toward ordination, the commission said they thought I needed a new field ed experience – in short, I wouldn’t be able to be ordained at the time I’d planned – I’d need to do my field ed over at a parish they would find for me and then reapply for candidacy. This represented a wilderness experience for me, one in which I wondered around in the desert not quite knowing what was ahead, not being able to enter the Promised Land as I had hoped. I had to rely on God, because only God knew what was ahead, only God could lead me.

The Israelites had been wondering around a relatively small piece of land for 40 years, having to rely on God to meet their needs. At times they had become anxious; once they even almost made it to the Promised Land, only to be consigned to roam longer in the wilderness because they were so afraid of what awaited them in the Promised Land and didn’t believe God could deliver them.

It is during that time of wandering that we have Psalm 90, which is ascribed to Moses. The psalm is a prayer to God. The beginning of the psalm praises God for God’s eternal presence with the Israelites in their wandering and in their human frailties – God’s presence among the fear, worry, anxiety, grief. The last part asks that God deliver the community from its wandering and bring them to the land of their hopes – the land of promise.

We know that God did this. Moses’ death, which we read about in Deuteronomy, was one of the last major events to happen before the Lord, through Joshua, led those Israelites into the Promised Land. God was with the Israelites in the wilderness, supplying all their needs, and working through those wanderings to transform their thinking, to mold them more into His people. But that wasn’t all. In God’s time, God delivered them into the land he promised them. He gave them victory over those taller and stronger people in that land. God, who was and is always there, delivered them in the wilderness and then lifted them into joy.

Most of us have had times when we have wondered in the wilderness, where we’ve been thrown -- perhaps by misfortune, perhaps by our own choices, perhaps by the choices of another. We thought we were on a journey of hope and promise and somehow have gotten stuck, wandering about in confusion and without being in control of our lives, without knowing exactly what the next step will be. We’ve had those times as individuals; we have those times as a community. God helps us in those wilderness times, walking beside us, meeting our needs and transforming us in those times into better disciples. Then, in God’s times, God delivers us. God provides us with what we need for victory, for joy. The morning comes out of the dark night.

Back to my story. Of course, God was with me as I was assigned for field ed to a wonderful parish and to a good mentor who still is a friend. The extra experience I gained in that wilderness time helped to prepare me for the call I now have. During that time, I had to rely on faith that this process would work out – no longer could I rely on having checked the right boxes. And the delayed ordination time put me into the search process the same time that you were. God provide me with what I needed. God knew what would come out of that wilderness. God delivered me.

O God, satisfy us by our loving-kindness in the morning;

 so shall we rejoice and be glad all the days of our life.

Amen