

Thirsting in the Wilderness

Exodus 17:1-7

October 27, 2020

The scripture this morning from Exodus 17 takes place between the exodus of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, and their covenant with God at Mt. Sinai. Between the two was a journey during which the people and Moses met various challenges of survival and faith. The Israelites were in a physical and spiritual wilderness, wondering if they would survive, let alone ever arrive at the Promised Land. They were running short of water, and began to panic. They complained to Moses, their leader.

This was not the first time they had grumbled. First, the water they had to drink was bitter. Then, they had no food to eat. God had provided for the Israelites in the past, but that didn't keep them from complaining. They were fine, as long as they had what they needed. But when it appeared that they lacked the necessary resources to survive, they became anxious.

They were angry at Moses, and blamed him for taking them away from Egypt where they had what they needed to survive, even though they were slaves. The people quarreled with Moses as they camped at Rephidim, and said, "Give us water to drink." "But there *was* no water for the people to drink." (17:1)

Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" (17:2) 17:3 But the people thirsted, and complained again against Moses, saying, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (Exodus 17:3)

Arguing with Moses was nearly as bad as arguing with God, since Moses was God's appointed spiritual leader. But Moses was in over his head. He needed God's divine guidance. He recognized his vulnerability. So, to save himself, Moses turned to God and asked for help. That's never a bad thing to do! I like to point that out to our leaders, because Moses didn't have to have all the answers, but he did know who to turn do.

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Do you ask God for help when you find yourself with a need? When you're in over your head? What is it you thirst for? Perhaps you thirst for happiness, good health, peace or a miracle. Maybe like the Israelites, you or someone you know is dealing with issues of plain survival, and you're afraid for what the future holds during these challenging times. So many are just trying to get by during these tough economic times, and the Promised Land seems very far away for so many.

Most of the time we ask God to solve our problems or fill our needs. However, when we ask God to help, we have to be willing to receive God's answer, which may not be the one we want. In essence, we need to abide by God's standards, and not our own. But do we really?

Look at the Israelites. Yet another crisis loomed for them just ahead. They were attacked by the Amalekites, but *again* The Lord delivered them! You would think they would have noticed a pattern and would have learned to trust God more by this time . . . but that was not the case. Vs. 7 sums up their sentiment pretty well. They asked: "Is God among us or not?"

There was dissension and quarreling among them. It's a wonder they ever made it to the Promised Land at all! Of course, many of them didn't. What took forty years should have only taken a month, as some biblical scholars have noted. It was only a distance of some 240 miles at most, but it took them forty years to get there! Many times they went in circles, or even backtracked. Maybe even God was wondering if this journey had been a mistake.

Moses was wondering what to do next. He cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." (17:4) We can imagine Moses withdrawing to a quiet place and praying fervently to God. "What *shall* I do with this people, O Lord?"

It wasn't long until he had his answer. The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Ex 17:6

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. (17:5-6) And there was water . . . cold, plentiful, refreshing water. As a postscript, we read that Moses called the place Massah and Meribah -- Massah means "testing," and Meribah means "quarreling".

All along the way . . . even as they were about to enter the Promised Land, people felt discouraged and afraid, and actually wanted to return to slavery and captivity in Egypt. (Numbers 14) Most of the charter members who set out from Egypt never made it to the Promised Land. They died or defected along the way. Even Moses failed to make it to the Promised Land, having to settle for a glimpse from afar before he died. (Dt. 34:1-4)

Fortunately, a few survived, like Joshua and Caleb, who desperately encouraged the people to remain obedient and courageous. (Numbers 14:24) The story of the Israelites in the wilderness also reminds us that God is always listening. So God told

Moses to go ahead of the people to Mt. Horeb, which was a place of covenant and special blessing. He told Moses to strike the rock with his staff and water would come out. Moses did as God instructed, and they were blessed with cold, fresh water.

God may not always give us what we want, but gives us what we need. When the Israelites were hungry, God gave them manna. And when Moses cried out to God for help, God led him to water. God is acutely aware of our needs.

What it shows is that there is never a *production* problem, because God provides. But sometimes there is a *distribution* problem, and that's where Moses came in. God was trusting them to go forth and carry out God's will.

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This story is about the power of God who brought forth water from a rock. But it's also about the lack of faith of God's own people. They complained about not having water, but they lacked the faith in God to provide for them. They somehow believed that as God's chosen, they deserved better –Maybe they thought that they should be immune from the hardship and suffering that God's people ultimately encountered.

They had forgotten the fact that they were slaves before the Exodus ... that they were living in bondage and now they were liberated –and yet they still remained in bondage to their own fears and doubts and lack of trust in God. Even their freedom did not guarantee they would always have everything they needed. Rather than be grateful for their freedom, they complained when they encountered hardship. What they really needed was some “living water,” and a fresh stream of faith.

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Jesus became a source of living water for many people in the New Testament. As he said to the Samaritan woman at the well, he could give her living water and she would never thirst. The prescription for the Israelites and for us is to replace a disgruntled, grumbling, complaining, negative spirit with a spirit of humility, contentment, and gratitude.

Someone once observed, the word “crisis” in the Greek means opportunity. You can't get blood out of a turnip, but God got water out of a rock! Have you ever tried to get water out of a rock? Have you ever tried to pull yourself out of a dry spell? With God's help, Moses finally prevailed, and you can too.

We are left to wonder what God might have accomplished had the people not been so bitter and given to grumbling in the wilderness. The water they had so desperately sought had been available all along. They only had to look to God, and trust that the solutions they sought had been present because God was with them. Every generation and every individual has to answer the question for themselves:

"Is the LORD among us or not?" Ex. 17:1-7

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What are you thirsty for today? Has your well run dry due to the long, extended time of sheltering due to covid? Are you thirsty and dry because a family member or loved one has lost their job? Has your spiritual life become dry and you long for living water, or you find yourself wandering in the wilderness because of the dry and barren landscape within?

When my spirit is dry, it helps to take a long walk, and admire the beauty of God's creation. When my spirit is dry, I practice meditation, read a good book, or enjoy a glass of wine on the patio, and think about how it symbolizes the cup of the new covenant.

It is imperative that you find small things to enjoy every day. Don't put it off. You can't afford to wait until covid is over to enjoy your life. It is easy for us to grumble like the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, but even now, God is giving a glimpse of the Promised Land for those who can see it. So let us remember who is leading the way. And don't be surprised if you can even get water out of a rock.
Amen

Exodus 17:1-7

17:1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

17:2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"

17:3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

17:4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

17:5 The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

17:6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

17:7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"