

A Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 27, 2020

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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. 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?" 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?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 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." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Exodus 17:1-7

There's a wonderful children's book entitled "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie". It starts out like this.... "If you give a mouse a cookie, he's going to ask for a glass of milk. When you give him the milk, he'll probably ask you for a straw. When he's finished, he'll ask for a napkin. Then....." and on and on the story goes in this fashion with the mouse never quite satisfied, but continually wanting something else.

I could not help but think about this cute children's story when I read our passage from Exodus for today. Only the Israelites were not as cute as the mouse! They had perfected their whining and complaining to a fine art. God delivered them from slavery in Egypt, parting the sea along the way to aid in their escape. Then they wanted bread, which God rained from heaven. Then they wanted meat, so God sent them quail. Then they were thirsty....do you see where this is going?

The people had witnessed God's mighty acts of power through a series of events. God sent plagues upon the Egyptians. Then God delivered the Israelites from the toils of slavery and brickmaking, and protected them from the pursuing Egyptian army. Then God provided food from heaven, manna and quail, when they were hungry. Now... they are thirsty.

While we've all been thirsty, most of us can't identify with being thirsty in a parched, dry, desert. All we have to do is turn on a faucet – we don't know what it's like to be truly thirsty. We have the blessing of safe water to drink, although there are many who do not. A trip to any grocery store will show you an entire aisle of water in numerous varieties, flavors, and sizes!

But what about our other thirsts? What are those things we long for, those things we thirst for, but cannot seem to obtain? Perhaps we long for enough money to pay the bills, for a way forward after a divorce or a loss. We may long for healing, whether it be physical or emotional; for ourselves or for someone else.

Right now we thirst for time with family and friends, social events, cultural offerings and travel; all of this has dried up in our pandemic life. We long for an end to injustice and oppression, poverty and hunger. Some of us thirst for a return to the way things used to be. We are all thirsty for a few good hugs! These kinds of thirst can be insatiable.

Are we so different from the Israelites? Their needs were being met, yet they could not trust God to continue to provide for them. To *not* trust God *is* to be in the desert - to be in the desert of fear, anxiety, and hopelessness. What is it that *we* grumble and complain about?

The Israelites have a long history of complaining. So do we. It's human nature, and no one knows this better than the God who created us! Being truly thirsty is a valid complaint. To hunger and thirst for righteousness is actually a blessing as we know from the Sermon on the Mount.

But what is *not* valid or righteous or a blessing is the way the Israelites stopped trusting God and turned against Moses, who has just been God's means of grace. And that is the problem. When we transfer our fear and anxieties about not having enough onto those around us, we betray God's trust. I am reminded of a line in Eucharistic Prayer C - *But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another. Have mercy, Lord, for we are sinners in your sight.*

The book of Exodus is full of grumbling and complaining Israelites, but it is also full of the faithfulness and abundance of God. While Moses was all too human, there are still some things we can learn from him here. Moses was tired and thirsty too, but he refused to spend much time arguing with the rebellious Israelites. Instead, Moses cried out to the Lord. Moses asked God for help because he knew God as Provider. Moses *remembered* all the ways God had delivered them and blessed them in the past.

God heard Moses ask for help, and God patiently heard the negative questions from the Israelites. We have our own questions for God, which arise out of our own fears and anxieties. But underneath it all is a deeper, existential question – and that question is, “In the midst of our thirst, is God there or not?”

The Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying “Is the Lord among us or not?” My guess is that each one of us has asked that same question at some time or another in our lives. Where is God in my current crisis? God answered Moses by instructing him to go and strike the rock at Horeb. But God did not send Moses alone. He sent him with some of the elders of Israel, and God promised to be with him in the desert, in that dry desert full of rocks and stiff-necked, angry, Israelites. God gave Moses something to do, and he did not have to do it alone.

I can only imagine the reaction of the already grumpy people to this most unlikely solution. What? We are dying of thirst and you want us to go on a rock hunt? Really? But Moses trusted God and accepted the help of the elders, thereby tapping into God's provision of water. At times our lives can seem like a rocky desert. Is the Lord among us or not? God knows our needs; God knows us – our families, where we work, our schools and communities, our fears and our hope. God stands with us in our rocky places and sometimes those rocks become the very provider of our thirst-quenching water.

In their passage through the Red Sea the Israelites became free children of God. Through our baptism we also become free children of God. This does not mean life will not be without its rocky places. It does mean that God is with us always and that we have a community of faith to support us.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! The Lord is among us! As a community of faith we help one another to remember, and we teach one other to look for the miraculous among the mundane. The Israelites must have been amazed that the water they were so thirsty for was right there, just under the surface all along! What appears in our lives to be a landscape of hard, dry, impossibility can become a stream of living water if we will allow God to break the surface of our fear, anxiety and doubt. The Israelites saw only desert and rocks, but Moses saw what desert monks and mystics have always seen – a God who often comes to us in our most troubled moments, a God who comes to provide, not only water, but living water.

Amen.