

Testing, Testing . . .

A Sermon Preached by the
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 17:1-7
Matthew 21:23-32

Things aren't looking good for Moses this week. Through the Old Testament lectionary choices, we have followed the adventures of Moses and the Israelites as they were released from slavery in Egypt, as God led them into the wilderness, and as they have discovered that freedom may indeed be "just another word for nothin' left to lose." As dreadful as slavery in Egypt was, it had the advantage of providing three square meals a day – or at least that's what their selective memory told them. But in spite of some pretty amazing evidence, in spite of the constant presence of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, in spite of the Red Sea parting and manna on the ground, the Israelites continued to complain and whine and blame Moses for everything that had gone wrong.

This morning's lesson finds them camped at an oasis called Rephidim, which actually means "support and nourishment," but again there was no water to drink. And they bitterly complained, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Just to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

Now if you've ever seen pictures of the Sinai Peninsula, or have traveled to that part of the world, you know that the desert is not a very hospitable place. I haven't been there, but I've heard it described as a place of barren valleys, spectacular limestone hills and multi-colored granite mountains rising several thousand feet into the air. Like the southwestern desert areas of this country, I imagine there is a certain elegance in the rock formations and truly breathtaking beauty in the colors that are not seen anywhere else. But I also imagine that it is a forbidding and dangerous place for the inexperienced traveler. It is a land of extremes. The days are hot and dry, but when the sun goes down the temperature goes down with it. There is very little vegetation or rainfall in the Sinai, and when the rains come they're gully-washers.

Those of you who have spent any time in Arizona or New Mexico might be able to relate to that. You now that when the rains come, the *arroyos*, the dry gullies or little riverbeds, can fill up surprisingly fast. You don't want to be caught in one when the skies open up.

In the Sinai, the rainwater will sometimes collect in the limestone rock, in pockets dug deep by the force of the rushing torrents of water; and in time, the pockets are sealed by calcium deposits. If you were a desert dweller, you would learn to identify certain rock formations, and would know which ones were likely to have water hidden beneath the surface. Striking that rock in the right place would probably produce drinking water. And Moses, probably to his enormous relief, is about to learn that, in spite of popular belief, you really can get water from a rock.

But we're not there yet. To say that the Israelites were losing patience with Moses is an understatement. In fact, when Moses went to God to ask for help, there was a touch of fear as well as a note of frustration in his conversation with God. He sensed that the desperation and fear rumbling through the crowd was about to turn to anger, and that his life was very possibly in danger.

Now notice that Moses didn't say, "Okay, God, where's the water?" or "What are you going to do about it, God?" That would have been the easy thing to do. That's what I would have done. After all, God put him in this mess, God should get him out of it. I'm reminded of something Anne Lamott wrote in her book *Traveling Mercies*. She said, "Again and again I tell God I need help, and God says, 'Well, isn't that fabulous? Because I need help too. So you go get that old woman over there some water, and I'll figure out what we're going to do about *your* stuff.'"¹

Maybe Moses knew that God might say, "I need help too. Go get those people a drink of water and I'll figure out how to get you out of this pickle." Whatever went through his mind, Moses said instead, "What shall I do with this people?" He didn't ask to be bailed out of a tough situation. He knew that he was in this for the long haul and he wasn't trying to avoid responsibility. And the first thing that God advised Moses to do was to get out of the way, to get out of the middle of what was quickly turning into a crisis. Moses was advised to go ahead of the people, taking some of the elders with him, carrying his staff, to a rock at Horeb, where he would meet God.

I think the hardest thing to do when you're standing in the wilderness, in the middle of something terrifying or difficult or confusing or just plain tiring, is to take a step in one direction or another. Sometimes it doesn't matter which way we go; it just matters that we make a move to break the paralysis that seems to overcome us when we're in the wilderness.

All of us have known that paralysis. All of us have known what it feels like to be overwhelmed, to be so frightened or angry or in such despair that we are unable to function; when our normal coping abilities have shut down and we are not able to recognize God's creative presence in our lives. When we, like the Israelites, say, "Is God among us . . . or not?"

The end of this chapter in the wilderness expedition is, of course, that Moses struck the rock and water poured forth. The moral of the story is that God is faithful, in spite of the testing and quarreling and faithlessness of Israel, which caused Moses to call the place Massah and Meribah, forever remembered for that quarreling and testing.

How interesting that this particular Old Testament lesson is paired today with the one we read from the Gospel of Matthew, wherein we find the elders and chief priests testing and quarreling with Jesus. "Who do you think you are? What are you doing here? Who ordained you to this ministry?" And Jesus, knowing that two can play this game, responds with a parable, saying, "What do you think? A man had two sons . . ." and when he asked the first one to work in the vineyard, he refused, but later changed his mind and did the work. The second son agreed to go, but never showed up. So which one did the will of his father?

When the elder smugly answered, of course, it was the first son, Jesus just blew them out of the water saying that the tax collectors and prostitutes would be going into the kingdom of God before they ever got there. Why? Because those tax collectors and

¹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, New York: Anchor Books, 1999, p. 120.

prostitutes, the lowest of the low, the worst you could be compared to, were the ones who believed and took that first step out of the wilderness. They didn't stand around and talk about what they were going to do. They didn't stand around and complain that they were thirsty and hungry. They didn't stand around the quarrel with God about whether or not God was going to save them. And because they were religious leaders, those chief priests were known for their words, but not so much for their deeds. They knew it was easy to say, "Lord, Lord . . ." but not so easy to do what God asked of them.

But then, who among us has not been like that second son? We all know how hard it is to keep the promises we've made. One writer observed, "The problem with living sacrifices is that they keep creeping off the altar. We know about the creeping. We would rather direct this parable to others."

He goes on to write, "The world turns away from our wordy gospel. What stops those outside of the church in their tracks are those who have learned to move beyond the words. It isn't only the Gandhis and the Rosa Parkses and the Mother Teresas who remind us all over again what faith and commitment are all about. It's (also people like – and you fill in the blank here) – he uses those medical practitioners in Doctors Without Borders who travel on their own time and expense to out-of-the-way places like Niger. They're told that the people they treat are too far gone, that they will soon die from malnutrition. This doesn't stop them – they do what they can."

And then he tells the story of receiving a bulletin from the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. One Sunday his son waited in a long line of visitors to listen to Jimmy Carter teach Sunday School. He stayed for worship and sent his father the bulletin, knowing that he would like to see it. Reading through the bulletin, he says, "My eye stopped at this notice in the bulletin: *Rosalynn Carter will clean the church next Saturday. Jimmy Carter will cut the grass and trim the shrubbery.*" He concludes by saying that, "Some living sacrifices do not slip off the altar."²

They are the ones who, like Moses, know that the only faithful response is action. It is about water from a rock, about discovering those places in our world where God, working through us and in us, can break through to release life-giving water, whether it is in our families, our jobs, our neighborhoods or schools or communities or churches. It is about removing the barriers, working not for our own self-interests but in the interest of the common good, even if it means that we relinquish some power. It may mean turning over the tables in the temple or crossing the road to help the stranger or striking the rock to get water. Sometimes it is saying, "Well, I don't know what to do, but I have to do something," and then letting God show you how to get water from a rock. It may not always work, but when it does, those living waters can carry you along way.

I've been in this business long enough to know that this in-between time can feel like the wilderness – for both the congregation and the pastor, and undoubtedly the church staff! There are times when we all whine and times when we all move together, and sooner or later we come to the other side. And I promise it won't take forty years. There are times when we may feel like creeping off the altar, in spite of the promises we've made to stay together and trust God. We may decide to wait until the call process is over and a new pastor is in place before we commit either our time or our money. Some of us live well with uncertainty and some of us do not.

² Roger Lovette, "Showing Up," *The Christian Century*, September 20, 2005, p. 20.

But while we're waiting – and, okay, maybe once in a while grumbling and whining and wishing for something different – the church goes on with its mission and ministry in the community and in the world. While we're waiting for some proof that God is among us, even though we've been assured of it time and time again, the church goes on caring for one another and for the poor and hungry and tired and broken ones at our door. The vineyard doesn't wait for us to decide that it's time to go to work.

We are coming to the time of year when we make decisions about the stewardship of our time and financial resources. The Nominating Committee has invited all of you to prayerfully consider whether this is the time for you to serve the church as a deacon or an elder. The Stewardship Committee has invited all of you to come to a communal meal here at the church and hear about our hopes and dreams for the future of Oak Grove, and decide how you will work and contribute to support those hopes and dreams.

This is the time to look for those places deep within ourselves that we have allowed to shrivel and die for lack of water. What will it take to break them open? Can we allow God to strike the most vulnerable parts of us so that living water can rush in? It can be a frightening possibility, especially if we have been hiding the hurt or protecting ourselves from pain. But we also know that until we allow wounds to be opened to the light and air, to be washed clean with the waters of forgiveness and reconciliation, they remain infected and painful.

There may be places in our hearts where water once flowed, but where we have allowed frustration and anger to seal them over, and have determined that we will not open ourselves to the possibility of being disappointed. What will it take to let that living water flow through us again? Can we remember what it was like to drink deeply from the well of living water?

If we can't, we would do well to listen to the words from our Psalm for today, Psalm 78: "We will not hide them from our children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might, and the wonders that God has done . . . In the sight of their ancestors, God worked marvels in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan. God divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap. In the daytime, God led them with a cloud, and all night long with a fiery light. God split rocks open in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. God made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers."

The only faithful response is action. Thanks be to the God who provides living water. Amen.