

Exodus 17:1-7

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?"

With Us or Not? - March 12, 2023

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Another name for this sermon could be, “What have you done for me lately?” Today’s passage from Exodus takes place after the Israelites had escaped from Egypt led by Moses. If you recall the movie, The Ten Commandments, or were present in Sunday school, you may recall the story of the liberation of the Israelites.

The literal, biological ancestor of the Jewish people, and a good number of Arab people, was a man named Abraham. As the biblical story goes, Abraham had an encounter with God in the city of Ur in what we call Iraq some 4000 years ago. God called Abraham to uproot his family and relocate to a “Promised Land,” a land “flowing with milk and honey.” Moreover, God promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations — a rather amazing promise because at the time, Abraham had no children of his own.

Anyway, Abraham listened to God and did move to the land we now call Israel. He did have children, first through his wife’s servant Hagar, a boy called Ishmael. Later he had a child by his own wife, Sarah, a son named Issac. Ishmael went on to become the Father of the Arab people and Issac the Father of the Jewish people.

For a few generations, the descendants of Abraham lived in the land God gave them, but encountered a terrible famine. They had to move south to Egypt where they became part of the fabric of that nation and grew tremendously in number. After some time, the Egyptians became worried about all the Israelite foreigners in their nation and decided to make them slaves. For hundreds of years, the Israelites were slaves of the Egyptians and prayed to God for a release from their captivity.

God called a man named Moses to lead the liberation of the Israelites. Moses was especially suited to the job because he, though an Israelite, had been raised in the palace of the Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. Moses demanded that the Pharaoh free his people, announcing 10 plagues or environmental catastrophes that God would send to force Pharaoh’s hand. The plagues included swarms of frogs and gnats, pollution of the water supply, and hailstorms — in short, events that could only be called miraculous. The worst plague was God’s decreeing the death of the first-born male children of Egypt. Pharaoh finally let the Israelites go — an event now commemorated as the Passover, the most important event of the Jewish religion.

Moses lead his people into the desert. When Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army to recapture the fleeing Israelites, they found themselves trapped on the shore of a body of water called the Sea of Reeds, also translated as “The Red Sea.” God performed another miracle by removing the water long enough to allow the Israelites to cross safely to the other side — then allowing the water to suddenly return, destroying the pursuing Egyptians.

Now safe from Egyptians, Moses with God's guidance managed the task of building a nation out of a bunch of escaped slaves and — of immediate importance — providing food and water for them in the hot, dry desert. Shortly after the escape from Egypt, God called Moses to the summit of Mt. Sinai by yet another miracle in order to receive the Ten Commandments. Shortly after coming down from the mountain, the people ran out of food and water complaining, quite accurately, that they had nothing to eat. Many were angry at Moses and wanted to kill him for leading them into the desert to die. God brought them to a brackish pond into which Moses threw a log and thus miraculously purified the water for the people. God fulfilled their need for food with another miracle by sending the people food in the form of manna — a strange substance that formed like dew — sending it every day. God also sent them meat in the form of flocks of quail. Thus the people were fed, watered, and had guidelines from God as to how they were to live their lives in freedom.

And now we come to today's story.

You may have noticed that I used the word "miracle" not once, but many times, because what God did and continued to do for the people can only be characterized by the word miracle. We might think that after God brought them out of Egypt, guided them across the Red Sea, gave them the Ten Commandments, fed them, and provided water, the Israelites might have started to think that God was passionately committed to caring for and about them, not just once but forever.

At the time of their escape, the Israelites became a people who were living on the edge of survival. They had no plan when they left Egypt, they had no way to cross the sea, they had no access to food and water. They simply lived day to day. They had no idea where their food and water were coming from — yet it did. Somehow every day, like clockwork, they received from the hand of God their daily bread. Hmm, daily bread. Isn't that a phrase from something we say every week?

Yes, every week we say the Lord's Prayer. The first thing we ask of God is, "Give us this day our Daily Bread." In other words, "O God, provide for our needs this day, just this day. We trust you to take care of us. We won't worry too much about tomorrow because You are with us right here, right now. You know what we need even before we ask and we have faith that you will provide — not too much, not too little, but what we need for this day."

But friends, do we really believe it? Do we really believe God is there on our side, caring for us day by day? We say we do, but how do we act? Do we have confidence that God is actively caring about us and taking care of us? I'm not going to give examples. You have to think about that for yourselves and reach your own conclusions.

But that's not the point.

The truth is no matter about what has happened in the past, we keep having doubts and fears about God. Whether we believe God has done a lot for us or we have mostly pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps, we constantly wonder not if, but when we face trouble, will God be there?

In today's passage, the Israelites are again angry at Moses. Again, no water. They don't mention God directly, but Moses knows that they are mad at him merely because they can physically see him, their real anger is reserved for God.

Moses is exasperated. He asks the people why they test the Lord. There is, of course, every reason for the people to be angry. Water is an absolute necessity in the hot desert. Our bodies get dehydrated very quickly in the heat and low humidity. Moses knows this. Moses could easily have anticipated the people's reaction. Nevertheless, Moses goes to God and exclaims, "What shall I do with this people?" Notice he says, "this people." Not "my people" or "your people," but "this people," completely detaching himself from them. He sounds like he wants nothing to do with them.

But isn't Moses right, at least partially? I mean, poor Moses has been at the center of every critical situation that concerned the Israelites. Moses faced Pharaoh alone carrying only a wooden stick. He looked at the sea alone with his people and the Egyptian army bearing down on his back. He ascended Mt. Sinai alone and was up there 40 days — gone so long the people thought he'd never return. He faced the people's anger at having no food and no water and interceded for the people with God. Again and again, Moses witnessed God constantly and faithfully providing for the people — coming through every time. More importantly, Moses had no idea how God was going to provide good things for the people, he just trusted that God would do something and do it well.

The Israelites were angry because they had no water — which was quite understandable. They wanted water. They needed water. At the same time, they also forgot that they were already receiving daily bread and meat from the hand of God. It didn't matter. Instead of having confidence that the God who liberated them and was feeding them would also give them water — without even asking for it — they wanted to kill Moses and thereby turn their backs on God.

Friends, isn't that our story? When things aren't going our way, when life seems to be a total mess, when we see no way out of our problems, don't we get mad? Don't we get frustrated? Don't we wonder whether God is with us? Yes, of course we do. Sure, God came through last time, but what about this time? Will God save us this time or abandon us?

We are finally through or almost through a huge challenge to our nation and our world. The Coronavirus, or as we are supposed to say, Covid-19, infected and killed millions of people worldwide. It ravaged our economy. It closed our schools. It caused people to lose their jobs and income. It pushed our health care system beyond its limits. It tested the skills of our political leaders.

Most of all, it caused fear and doubt at all levels of society. We just didn't know who is or is not infected. We didn't know where or how to get tested. We didn't know that if we are found to have Covid-19 whether we could find a hospital to treat us. We didn't know if our stores would have adequate supplies of anything so we bought everything just in case. We were uncertain, we were afraid, and unlike the Israelites, we didn't even have a Moses to lead us — no one did. We were all just guessing.

Now, can you identify with the Israelites back in the day? They, too, were uncertain, afraid, and they even had Moses with them.

The question for them is the same question for us today, "Is God with us, or not?"

The problem is friends, is that that is the completely wrong question, both for the Israelites back then and especially for us today. We have constantly assumed that the problem, whenever we have difficulties, questions, or setbacks — we assume the problem is with God, not us. When we are in trouble, just blame God. When we are confused, just blame God. When we aren't getting what we want out of life, just blame God. It's God's fault, we have nothing to do with it.

But friends, the real question we should be asking is not directed at God, but at ourselves. Rather than ask if God is with us or not, we should ask are we, are we, are we going to allow God to help us in God's way, in God's time, using God's wisdom and not ours. That's the question. Can we accept or even start to accept that God knows — always knows — what we need, yes need, before we even ask. And friends, because God knows what we need, can we not have faith that God will provide for us? In other words, we should not ask whether God is with us, we should be asking if we are with God?

Are you willing, am I willing, are we willing to trust that God will show us what to do, exactly when we need to know, and miraculously, God's plan will without a doubt be better than anything we can imagine on our own? Are you, am I, are we with God? — not, not, not, is God with us.

Every week, I close our service with the words, "God loves you more than you can imagine and walks beside you every step of the way through this journey called life — and beyond." Once we choose to believe those words, once we stop asking where God is but instead ask where we are in our willingness to trust God — once that happens, we will know God is always there, always has been, and always will be. In this time of global pandemic, it is time to trust in God. No doubt, No fear. Just peace.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.