

“It’s About More than the water”

Exodus 17:1-7

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Today’s text sounds like the same song, third verse, doesn’t it? We’ve been in the Exodus story for four weeks now, and for the last three, the Hebrews have been complaining. First they complained when they found themselves seemingly trapped between the Red Sea and the advancing Egyptian army. Then last week we heard them complain about not having food to eat. Today, they complain about not having water. They quarrel with Moses and ask, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, and our children and our livestock with thirst?” This time, they’ve added the children and the livestock – it raises the ante a bit doesn’t it? Like we said last week, the Hebrews are slow learners.

During Bible study on Wednesday night, we had a lively discussion about whether the Hebrews had any right to complain. The easiest answer is no, after all, they’ve seen God provide for them in miraculous ways. Back in Egypt, the plagues didn’t affect them. When their backs were against the sea, God made a way when there was no way, and then God promised daily bread from heaven every day that they were in the wilderness.

In today’s story, they have another opportunity to recognize that when they are in need, they can trust God to provide for them. It gives them another opportunity to exercise their faith in God. This should be getting easier and easier as they have seen God provide time and time again, shouldn’t it? But instead of reaching out to God for help, they lash out against Moses, demanding that he give them something to drink.<sup>1</sup> When they can’t see or trust God, they attack the leader they can see.

This time, Moses gets frustrated and he cries out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” It sounds like the Hebrews are turning from peaceful protest to mob violence. In response, God gives Moses very specific instructions, and once again, God provides for the people. But this story doesn’t have the same happy ending as some of the others, does it? After the Lord led them through the Red Sea, we heard that the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in Moses. But not today. Today the story ends with, “and Moses called the place Massah and Meribah which mean “test” and “quarrel.”” The place names serve as reminder that this is not one of Israel’s finer moments.

Just like the story about the manna last week, this passage is about far more than the water, and I want us to reflect on some of the deeper lessons it offers us this morning. First, I am grateful for stories like these, and all the others throughout Scripture, that share the struggles of those who seek to follow God. The writers of the Bible could have chosen only to share the best about the Hebrews, but what a tragedy that would have been. Instead of being real and honest, scripture would have been much, much shorter, and read more like our annual family Christmas letters and most of our Facebook pages – hitting only the highlights and our successes for the year. And how discouraging would that have been? I would have read those glowing stories and thought, “I can never have faith like that, so why even try?” I’m grateful the writers of Scripture were humble enough to share their mistakes so we would know that they struggle too and learn from them.

In the same way, I hope that we are humble enough to share our struggles and mistakes, so that others can learn from us as well. I so appreciate the forgiveness plaque on the courthouse lawn next door, a true acknowledgment that we have not always done right, and an

encouragement to continue the work of doing better. All across our nation, we still have much work to do.

I also want us to notice that God's leading is not always toward an oasis. This is why we can only be so hard on the Hebrews. Each story we have heard these last few weeks has started with some form of "and God led them," or "Moses ordered them." In week two, God actually had them back-track right into the path of danger. Last week, the people left Elim – where they camped under the trees by twelve springs of water – to head into the wilderness. And every time God or Moses directed them, the people obeyed. Did they expect that because they were obeying God that their journey would be smooth sailing? Do we have that expectation? If so, it's a faulty one, because the Hebrews are right where God calls or leads them to be, and they still face hardships and dangers. The reality is, they are a people on the way, they are a people living in between a promise and its fulfillment. They are always moving from one occasion for obedience to another, and disobedience is always possible.

In the same way, we still live between the promise of the reign of God and the fulfillment of that promise, don't we? And just because we experience hardship and difficulty, it doesn't necessarily mean that we are being disobedient or that we are not right where God is leading us or calling us to be.

And speaking of a people on the way, did you ever notice that Mt. Sinai is in the middle of the wilderness? The law of God, the Ten Commandments comes to the people in the wilderness. God gives them the law for their life on the move. The wilderness that the Hebrews find themselves in, both literally and spiritually, is not creation as God intended it to be, but God's creative activity – in meeting the needs of the people and in giving them the law, is having

positive affects amidst the chaos and disorder. God continues to walk with them through it all.

(PAUSE)

The next thing that I want us to reflect on is that there is a difference between questioning God and testing God. God doesn't mind our questions and even our complaints. The Psalms are full of Israel's praises and their laments – their deep crying out to God in their distress. We are always free to pour out our hearts to God – that's not a problem and it does not show a lack of faith. Moses does it in this story today, "What do you want me to do with this people???"

The problem comes when we TEST God. What did Jesus say to the tempter in the wilderness, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Testing God is putting God to the proof, or coercing God to show God's hand. When we do this, we say that we will believe when God demonstrates God's power. "God, if you do x, y or z, then I will believe." We judge God based on whether or not we as individuals, or a faith community, or even a nation receive our desired outcomes. When we do this, we turn faith into sight and our religion becomes purely utilitarian.

There is another dangerous way that this theology manifests itself, another way that we test God. That's when we use God as our insurance policy by assuming that God will automatically protect us from harm. What does this look like? About ten years ago, I was in Zimbabwe, helping lead a women's conference. One night, my friend Hermina, who is a nurse and a long-time resident of Zimbabwe, led a session on women protecting themselves – physically and financially, from the AIDS crisis. As part of her presentation, she stressed the importance of safe-sex. During the question and answer period, one woman remarked that she didn't need protection that came in a box, that God would protect her. I have often wondered if she, and other women who share her view, became infected.

Just this week I was talking to a friend whose mother is in a high- risk group for COVID-19. His mother is a devout Catholic who refuses to wear a mask because she believes God will protect her. This kind of thinking is dangerous for several reasons. First, we live in a fallen world – we are all affected by disease, pollution and climate change, and the consequences of our poor choices. While I believe that God answers prayer –sometimes in miraculous ways, God also allows us live with the results of our choices.

Second, testing God in this way puts God in the role of a servant who is at our beck and call. We should never diminish God this way. Thirdly, it can lead us to think that God didn't protect us, or heal us because we didn't have enough faith. We all know stories of people who were martyred for the faith, and we all know people of great faith, like the apostle Paul, who prayed diligently for healing, yet their affliction remained. Who are we to question or diminish their faith? We have all heard the adage, don't judge someone until you have walked a mile in their shoes. (PAUSE)

Annie Johnson Flint was born in Vineland NJ just after the Civil War. She lost both parents before she was six and she was adopted by a childless couple. While she was still in her teens, she was afflicted with arthritis and lost her ability to walk. She aspired to become a composer and concert pianist, but her illness deprived her of the ability to play. She began to write poetry and set several of her poems to music. When she could no longer open her hands, she would type using only her knuckles. Out of her deep affliction, and using three passages of Scripture, she wrote the words to one of my favorite hymns. Think about the story of the Hebrews, and your own story, as you hear these words.

**He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater,  
He sendeth more strength as our labors increase;  
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,  
To multiplied trials His multiplied peace.**

**When we have exhausted our store of endurance,  
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,  
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources  
Our Father's full giving is only begun.**

**His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,  
His power no boundary known unto men;  
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus  
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.**

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<sup>ii</sup> This sermon contains ideas and phrases from Connections Study Guide, Interpretation Commentary, and the New Interpreter's Bible.