

Is the Lord Among Us?

Meditation on Exodus 17:1-7

March 19, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

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. ²The people quarrelled 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?' ³But 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?' ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' ⁵The 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. ⁶I 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. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'

We are happy and blessed to welcome a number of new members into our congregation today! Happy and blessed! The folks who are joining with us to love and serve the Lord and be nurtured in God's Word and Spirit come with a variety of spiritual gifts and talents.

We are a diverse group! If you look around the room, you see some people who grew up on Merritt Island or who have been living here a long time. You also see many who have lived in a variety of states before

coming here--people from the Southeast, Southwest, from the Mid-Atlantic and the Northeast, the West Coast and all the states in between! We have quite a few who have traveled the world; some have lived in other countries

Like you and I, our newest members have their own unique faith stories to share. Some were raised Presbyterian. Others were not.

When we had a gathering after worship a little while back with those considering joining the church, I shared how I was not raised Presbyterian. And how, at different times in my life, I had to find a new worship home --such as when I went away to college and then got married and moved to Baltimore -- and how hard it was to find a church that truly felt like home. We visited an assortment of churches, but it was a while before we felt that we were in the right place. And then we moved out to the suburbs and had to start all over again.

So, knowing my own struggle to find the right place to worship in my 20s and 30s, this makes me even more grateful to the Lord for this day -- when we joyfully welcome new friends, brothers and sisters, who are making a commitment to journey with us and serve the Lord alongside us. You have come to a place of grace, a place filled with imperfect people straining to hear God's voice and seeking to do God's will. This is a place that welcomes everyone, accepts you as you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, and encourages you in your walk with God. May you find hope and healing in this place. May you find love here. You have found a place where your gifts and talents are welcomed and needed! A safe place where there are people with whom you can share your sorrows, burdens and joys, a refuge from the storms of life.

May you find, in this place, comfort and strength in God's Word but also be challenged, transformed and equipped by the Spirit to do things for God that you never dreamed you would do. This is a place where you will find others like you--clinging to faith in times of trial, struggling to be the people God wants us to be.

Sometimes, when I read Exodus, I forget that Moses is the leader of a congregation--a very large congregation, at that. Exodus 12:37 says Moses led 600,000 adult males out of Egypt. (They didn't always count women and children back then.) God's people are on the move, physically and figuratively. God, through Moses, is leading the Israelites out of slavery and oppression to the land of the promise. But there are many years of uncomfortable transition, when God's people wander in the desert wilderness and lose their way, spiritually. The song of triumph that Moses and the Israelites sing to the Lord in Ex. 15 after God parts the Sea of Reeds, allowing the Israelites to pass unharmed, then taking the lives of the Egyptian troops pursuing them, soon turns to lament, when the wilderness proves to be a hard place to live. Just when they fear they will surely starve, God sends bread from heaven to feed them and continues to feed them daily for 40 years.

In today's passage, the Israelites camp at a place with no water. Rather than seeking help from the Lord and encouraging one another in times of difficulty, they quarrel with Moses and challenge his leadership, blaming him for their troubles. This isn't the first time they accuse him

of trying to kill them. In Exodus 14:11, they say to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?" This isn't the first time they question their decision to follow Moses and leave their life in Egypt. In Exodus 16:3, the Israelites say, "If only the LORD had killed us back in Egypt. There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death."

This is the first time, however, that they specifically mention their children and livestock. A whole new generation of Israelites are being born and raised without any first-hand experience of the life in Egypt God's people once lived. And Moses doesn't seem to be growing in faith or love as the years pass. He doesn't ask the Lord to provide water for the people who could die of thirst. Instead, he complains about the people God has called him to shepherd and seems to be concerned only about his own survival. Moses cries out to God, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

Our gracious God doesn't punish Israel for having a bad attitude and wanting to do away with Moses. The Lord knows what the people need--water to drink!--just as God knows what our needs are, before we ask. And God knows what Moses needs--a sign that the Lord is still using him to lead Israel and that God hasn't abandoned them to die in the wilderness without ever seeing the land of the promise.

The same staff that Moses uses to strike the Nile at God's command and bring about a sign of death for Pharaoh's people will be the one Moses must use now to strike the rock at Horeb--and bring about a

miracle of life for God's people. Horeb, in Deuteronomy, is the place where God will give God's life-giving word, *The Ten Commandments*, to Moses. But first, it is the place where God's people experience life-giving water from a most unlikely source, a rock.

Or is it? For God is often compared to a rock in the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 18:46 says, "The LORD lives! Blessed *be* my Rock! Let the God of my salvation be exalted." Psalm 18:2 says, "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge..." And again, Psalm 62:2, "Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken."

Thousands of years later, the Son of God will meet a Samaritan Woman at Jacob's well and take us back to the Exodus miracle with his promise to give all who believe on Him *living water* so we may never thirst again.

Our Exodus reading ends after Moses strikes the rock "in the sight of the elders of Israel." But we aren't left wondering if the water ever came from the rock--for if it had not, then God's people would not have survived. The passage concludes with the burning question on Israel's mind during their time of struggle. "Is the Lord among us--or not?"

It is human nature to look for someone to blame when things go wrong and to question the Lord's presence with us during times of suffering or loss. Or when things simply don't go the way we want them to. The reality is that God never left them! It was they who wandered away from the faith!

But God had a plan to bring them back. This was no accident that God's people camped in a place without water. In 17:1, we read how the

Israelites journeyed “by stages, *as the Lord commanded.*” The Lord knew they were going to have a challenge. And God planned to bless them with a miracle all along.

Water from a rock! How cool is that?

Friends, we will have challenges ahead as a congregation. We are in that uncomfortable transition, similar to ancient Israel, between the promise and its fulfillment as we wait and long for Christ’s return and the Kingdom of God coming to fruition. It isn’t easy to be the Church in this increasingly secular age. But it has never been “easy” to be followers of Christ! Just as Christ urges his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him, we should accept, even welcome, some hardship and sacrifice, trusting that God will give us the strength and courage to meet every challenge.

We need never question, as Israel did, if the Lord is among us. Christ says in Matthew 28:20, “And surely I am with you always even to the end of the age.” Let us never fail to be grateful for God’s many blessings to us and fall into grumbling and complaining. Let us be ever grateful for God’s grace--for forgiving us for all our sins and giving us eternal life with Him.

Let us give God thanks and praise for strengthening us in faith and numbers today! May we anticipate with hope and joy the miraculous blessings God has planned.

Like water from a rock! How cool is that?

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for being the rock of our salvation, our refuge, our deliverer! Thank you for your grace--for loving and forgiving us even though we are, at times, as faithless as the ancient Israelites, wandering in the wilderness. Help us, Lord, to be ever grateful for your blessings to us and not lose sight of your goodness. May we always sense your loving presence with us, especially during times of trial, so that we never feel abandoned or afraid. Thank you for drawing more believers into our congregation and growing our faith! Guide us to paths of righteousness as a congregation and as individuals. Mold us into the people you want us to be! In Christ we pray. Amen.