

# Covenant Word

## ***A God to Be Trusted***

Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 21:12-15,23-32

*I am indebted to Walter Brueggeman's sermon, "The Big Yes," found in volume 1 of his collect sermons.*

*A Message by  
The Reverend Sarah  
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Pastor  
Sunday  
October 1, 2017*

This has been a week of ecumenical gatherings for me. Just yesterday, I was at Temple Emmanuel's Yom Kippur service where their interim rabbi challenged the congregation to quit trying to maintain equilibrium, to stop aiming for stability, that it is no longer possible to make everything "ok." I kept waiting for him to acknowledge that we can trust God in the midst of cultural and personal chaos to work wonders of steadfastness when we cannot. But he never said that God can be trusted to do that.

I spent the entire week with the Presbyterians at their lovely conference center in Montreat, North Carolina. The course I attended was about resourcing Advent and so there were many opportunities for the exchange of ideas about the upcoming season. While I was the only Baptist, over half the group were women in senior pastor positions. It would probably be more accurate to say that they are solo pastors of very small congregations. I found that I was suddenly being regarded as the pastor of a big steeple church with the privilege of sharing staff duties with multiple full-time ministers and administrative staff resulting in vibrant programming. Most of the Presbyterian parishes represented were hailing about 35 members.

One female clergy person said that her handful of members are all over the age of 70. She knows that she is there to bury them as they die and then to have a funeral for the church. I kept waiting for her to acknowledge that she is trusting God to work wonders in response to their faithful steadfastness. But she never said

that God can be trusted to do that, no, instead, she said, "We are looking for a sign to tell us whether we should go ahead and just close the doors of the church."

"Looking for a sign" speaks to me of wilderness living, of being so short on the most basic of resources that we begin to wonder if God is present, if God is reliable, if God is working to make all things work together for good, if God can be trusted with the most elemental of things. Like the ministers I met who are barely hanging on in their churches – like our culture with its long season of fear, anxiety and violence – like those in the devastated areas of Florida, Texas, and the Virgin Islands – like the Israelites in their wanderings – doesn't our capacity for trust in God raise the question of "Is God with us or not? Send us a sign, so we will know you are with us!" we pray.

The Israelites are asking for a sign. Well past their flight from Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea; well past the feasts made on quail and manna, the Israelites are now murmuring for water. Scripture says they are in Rephidim,

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but every resource I read says that there is no such place. Nobody knows where Rephidim is, so it is mentioned only to mark for us that the Israelites were in a place of lack...a place where the most basic of elemental requirements for living are not present. For the Israelites that basic necessity is water.

They could not produce any for themselves. There were no wells. They have no adequate substitutes that can sustain them. Scripture focuses on their desperate need and how it causes them to ask the deepest and most common question of the faith: Is God with us or not? Can I trust God to be with me or not?

The question shows up in the midst of their complaining and arguing with Moses about water. They don't want a theological debate, they want a definitive sign. And the problem with signs is that they never satisfy. Isn't there always something bigger and better that God

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Thank you for  
wanting to read and  
study these thoughts  
more carefully.  
Please know that I do  
not take full credit for  
anything that may be  
contained within,  
because I may have  
read or heard  
something at some  
point during my  
pilgrimage and do not  
remember its source  
and thus, cannot give  
the rightful author  
his/her credit. I pray  
that you will find  
inspiration and  
encouragement.**



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can and should do for us? What good is being rescued from Pharaoh's army if God can't also deliver us our basic needs for each day, like bread and water?

And yet God does respond to the Israelites' cries. God gives water and thus answers Israel's deep question that "Yes, the Lord is among us! Yes, God has the capacity to turn wilderness into life-giving space. Yes, God is reliable and God is faithful. In a context of scarcity and anxiety, God creates life from death, joy from sorrow, and water from rocks in the wilderness."

Debbi is one of the female clergy persons that I met this week. Her congregation of 60 is in Canada and while she resonated with many of the challenges voiced by the others, there was something distinctly different about her. With the mention of her congregation, there is a light in her eyes and a softness to her face. She told us that her puppy's name is listed on the pastoral care committee's roster, because he visits in all the nursing homes and with shut-ins. In her visits, Debbi discovered that the senior adults near her church do not eat evening meals, because they are afraid to go out at night and food scarcity keeps them from cooking. So, Debbi started cooking at the church. She fixes lunch for the senior adults once a month and then she sends them home with 20 pre-prepared frozen meals for their consumption until the next month's lunch. There is no charge for any of it.

Members of the congregation have begun showing up to slice and dice, four ovens have been donated, and lots of good conversation bubbles up in the fellowship hall as all become resourced with the basic necessities of food and friendship and faith. It isn't a great big miraculous sign, but it is evidence of a God who cares about fulfilling our basic hungers in order to not just keep us alive but thriving in spite of wilderness.

It reminds me of how we gather at this table with friends for food and fellowship because of our faith. Our most basic needs are met here, and at this table, we receive visible, tangible, tastable signs that God is present in Jesus Christ who loves us, that God is reliable, that God is working to make all things work together for good, and that God can be trusted even with the most elemental of things.

On the last night that Jesus gathered with the disciples, he took the bread, he blessed the bread, he broke the bread, and he shared it with his friends. Let us pray:

We are grateful, O God, for these visible, tangible, tastable expressions of your great love for us. Thank you for being present and reliable even in our times of wilderness and questioning whether you are with us or not. May this bread and cup fortify us for living into your kingdom as witnesses of your love, mercy and grace through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

***Our most basic needs are met here, and at this table, we receive visible, tangible, tastable signs that God is present in Jesus Christ who loves us, that God is reliable, that God is working to make all things work together for good, and that God can be trusted even with the most elemental of things.***