

“Reflecting Our Faith”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent II – March 8, 2020

Exodus 17: 1-7

So, I want you to use your imagination a bit as we begin this morning’s message. First, I want you to imagine you are a tour guide – it could be anywhere you want it to be, here in the United States, somewhere overseas, anywhere. Your job is to welcome groups of tourists, show them the well-known places, discover new things about where they are visiting, and shepherd them through several days of sight-seeing, feasting on local cuisine – basically making their trip as positive as it can be.

The first two days go well, with only minor issues – a chartered bus is thirty minutes late picking the group up, a restaurant had your group’s reservation for the following night, but they accommodated you. All in all, things are going well. That is, until you travel to the next stop on your tour. Traffic is a nightmare, and you’re more than two hours late in arriving at your hotel. Then, when you finally get there, the hotel’s water has been shut off due to a water main break. No restrooms, no bath facilities – and it’s the only hotel in this small town you are staying at. Your tour group is tired, cranky, some of them are feeling sick, and when you tell them about the problem at the hotel, well, the onslaught begins. “What are you talking about?” “This is the last time I’m using this tour company!” “We’re going to die in this God-forsaken place!” “How could you do this to us?” It’s great being the tour guide, isn’t it?

Or, if you don’t want to imagine being a tour guide, consider being a parent on a family vacation. You’ve been on the road for ten hours, and you’ve got two hours to go until you reach your destination. But that’s when the snow starts falling, and the roads start getting slick, and the traffic slows to a crawl. It’s also when the children – who had been asleep for the last two hours – decide to wake up and start asking questions. “Where are we? How much further? I’m hungry – can we stop and get something to eat? When are we going to get there?” Sitting on that snow-covered interstate, you begin to wonder what you’ve done to deserve this punishment from God. It’s great being the parent, isn’t it?

Like these two modern examples, I wonder if that’s how Moses felt in this story from Exodus. Like a tour guide stuck with an unruly group, or like a parent having to manage the complaints of a car-full of whining children, Moses must have been thinking, “Lord, what have you done to me?” Actually, he does say, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me” (17:4). Being the leader isn’t always what it’s

cracked up to be. But as we will see, this story is not just about a bunch of whiners and their exasperated leader in the desert. It's a story that challenges us to ask where our faith is rooted, and how we are called to reflect that faith in our world today.

If you only read the two chapters preceding what we've read this morning in Exodus, you might think the only thing the Israelites did was complain. As soon as they crossed the Red Sea, the Israelites immediately started complaining. First, it was the water at Marah which was too bitter to drink (15:22-27). Then it was their hunger for something to eat in the wilderness (16:1-36). In both cases, the people "complained against Moses," and even wished they were back in the land of Egypt. In both cases, Moses turned to God and asked, "What shall I do?" And in both cases, the Lord answered Moses' plea: he turned the bitter water sweet, and he sent manna from heaven, so that the Israelites would not starve.

Now, we come to the waters at Meribah. The Israelites have been feasting on manna, but now they are thirsty. When they camped at Rephidim, we read, "there was no water for the people to drink" (17:1). So, the people do what anyone does when they aren't getting what they need: they complain to the leader. We read, "the people quarreled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink'" (17:2). You'll notice that they didn't say "please" or ask nicely, "Moses, can you maybe work on finding us some water to drink?" No, the people quarreled, even demanded, that Moses satisfy their pressing need. "Give us water to drink!"

I know I compared Moses earlier to a tour guide or a parent, and that comparison can hold water for a little while. But the truth of the matter is that he's more than a tour guide, more than a parent-figure. He is God's representative to the people. He's the one who God communicates with, and who communicates with God. And that is reflected in Moses' response to the people's complaining: "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" (17:2). In their complaints, the Israelites reveal a lack of faith in God's providence and care, testing the one who has brought them out of slavery in Egypt. But they're not in the Promised Land yet, they haven't reached their final destination. So, the complaining continues: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (17:4). I'll give them credit - they are playing up the melodramatic!

Instead of staying in the middle of this toxic triangle, Moses appeals directly to God. After being exasperated with trying to resolve the issue himself, Moses goes straight to the source. Look at what happens when Moses relies on God for help with the situation, instead of attempting to handle it on his own. Rather than remaining in a state of paralysis, God provides guidance and relief. God tells Moses to not only go ahead of the people, but to also take with him some of his trusted leaders, "the elders of Israel," to be witnesses of what God will do. At

that location, Moses is to use the same staff that he used to part the Red Sea, and at that place called Horeb, “strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink” (17:6).

Once again, God provides what the people need – water to drink – just as God has provided for their needs in the past: in the garden of Eden, to Abraham and God’s promise to bless the nations. But it is with particular directions and on God’s terms – not the Israelites’ terms – and in doing so, God reinforces their relationship as Creator and created ones.

As one commentator asks, “How can we know if God is with us, more literally, ‘in our midst’? What signs or evidence do we use for discerning the presence and providence of God?” (Frederick Niedner, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 74). In the minds of the Israelites, if their most basic need of water was not available, then perhaps their God had abandoned them. How would they survive this wilderness journey if God had left them? In their anxiety and fearfulness, they complain and question and demand answers from those in “leadership.”

In our minds, if what we perceive as our most basic needs are not being met, we might question if God is still present. Of course, we interpret our “basic needs” in a variety of ways. It might mean our health, our financial security, our physical safety, our sense of happiness or self-worth, or any number of things. But when we are not experiencing life as we feel it ought to be, then we become anxious and fearful, and we start to question others, as well as quarrel with God.

Here’s the thing about our God that we know from the entire biblical witness: God never leaves us. Even when God is angry or disappointed or frustrated with humanity, God never abandons us. Even when we are impatient or whining or needing something visible and real to trust in God, God never abandons us. Because, as we read in this story, God tells Moses and the Israelites and us, “I will be standing there in front of you” (17:6). Despite our doubt, our complaints, our testing, our whining, God is standing in front of us. God wants us to know that we can vent and complain and struggle all we want, and in the end, God will be standing there in front of us in love, providing for what we need, never abandoning us.

At our bible study on Tuesday, I shared the following image which comes from Jane Ferguson. She writes: *Let us imagine that when the water comes pouring out from the rock like a fountain, a spring in the desert, it flows so abundantly that it creates a pool in a cleft in the rocky hillside. As the people drink they can see themselves reflected in the pool. Perhaps, they see the streaks of tears down their sandy cheeks. Tears from their thirsty anguish turned to tears of relief. Do they see God in their reflection in this pool of water? In their tears? In their joy-filled faces? The water is a mirror of who God really is. God is love, abundance, forgiveness, providence.*

“How we see God is a direct reflection of how we see ourselves. If God brings to mind mostly fear and blame, it means there is too much fear and blame welled inside us. If we see God as full of love and compassion, so are we.” This is the first rule of love, according to the Shams of Tabriz . . . How we mirror God is also how we see God.

The Hebrew people in the desert saw God through the lens of fear and blame. They assumed that God was out to get them. Yet God, in steadfast love and faithfulness, responds to their complaints and doubts in the midst of their fear with water to keep them alive. God mirrors back redemption instead of condemnation . . . How do we mirror God in our world? How do we lead people to see God in steadfast love and faithfulness, instead of in their own image of stress, worry, judgment, and complaint? (Jane Anne Ferguson, Connections Commentary, Year A, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2019: 63).

A woman watches a parent waste away with a debilitating illness, and her faith in God appears to waste away, as well. Her image of an absent God is reflected in her feelings of hopelessness, fear, and anxiety. What would it look like if we walked alongside her, seeking to reflect an image of a God who is hurting, who is crying, who empathizes with the struggle she is experiencing? How might that mirroring reflect our faith – and her faith – in God?

A young man struggles to know what he is to do next. The doors which had felt wide open to his future now feel like they are closing up one after another. He becomes despondent and wonders where God is in his life anymore? What would it look like if we walked alongside him, seeking to reflect an image of a God who is still there, who hasn't abandoned him, and who is still opening new doors which he might not yet have realized? How might that mirroring reflect our faith – and his faith – in God?

All of us need that reminder that how we see God reflects how we mirror God to others in this world. Sometimes we are able to be that mirror for others. Sometimes we need others to reflect that image back to us when we are unable to see clearly God in our lives. Mercifully and thankfully, God is always present and will never abandon us. As we walk our Lenten Journey, may we trust and believe this statement of faith, and when called upon, be able to reflect our faith to a world which is desperate to hear God's good news.

Thanks be to God. Amen.