

Pentecost XXII
Exodus 17:1-7
September 27, 2020
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Thirsty. Have you ever been utterly, deeply thirsty? Parched mouth. Raging headache. Unable to shed tears? Often, we don't feel thirsty until we are already dehydrated. Thirst exerts itself as fatigue, confusion, irritability, even a soft spot atop your head.

Thirsty. When do you find yourself thirsty for things beyond water? The pandemic has demonstrated our thirst for human touch, for community. Here the ravages have skirted across our throats, or our bones, as our lives are upended. Is there a well of longing straight down your throat for calmness, connection, or the righting of a wrong, a longing that may well get expressed by the same dry throat, irritability, or headache or heart-ache.

Exodus 17 is a story of the people of God being desperately thirsty in the wilderness, caught between Egyptian slavery and God's Promised Land. It is a story about water, or the lack thereof, in the Sinai desert. It is a story about more than water – about anxieties, dangerous journeys, leadership, trust, and about how we construct the building blocks of our faith in God.

Water has played a central role throughout the Israelite story of escaping slavery in Egypt, as one scholar notes.¹ Living under the cruel rule of Pharaoh, the Israelites came to a breaking point when Pharaoh ordered all male infants to be drowned in the Nile River. Moses, the eventual leader, receives his name as one who is drawn out of the water. After pleas for release and a deluge of plagues, it is water – the waves of the Reed Sea – that stands between continued enslavement and liberation, water that parts for the Israelites to journey forward. Water has been a medium for threat; a vehicle for freedom, a paradox of pain and promise, struggle and salvation.

Now the people of God find themselves traveling through the Sinai Peninsula on a wilderness trek through desolate land. An absence of water is a primary attribute of the geography. Imagine in your mind's eye a crowd of migrants, escapees, who have left harsh cruelties of Egypt, crossed a sea, and entered a desert, acutely attentive to the necessities for survival: food, shelter, water.

The day comes when they cry: we have no water. We have camped where God has directed us to pitch our tents. We have followed Moses, entrusting him as our leader. Whether it is day five or day fifty matters not, there is no water. This is not the first time Israelites have cried about a lack in necessities. This will not be their last complaint either. Here is one moment in a series of

¹ Edelheit, Joseph A. "A Midrash on Water" in Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers, 1996. https://scholar.valpo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1069&context=ils_papers. Accessed 9/24/2020. I am indebted to Edelheit's work as a stimulating engagement of water, giving birth to many of the ideas flowing through this sermon.

ongoing moments in which complaint are lodged as they try to survive the desert with little knowledge of the future and few resources at their feet. We have no water.

The dialogue that unfolds between the people and Moses, and then between Moses and God gives us clues to the relational crises unfolding alongside the water ones. The people demand – Give us water! Give us what is basic to life, necessary for survival. Moses replies – Why are you looking to me? Why have you decided to complain? Notice that he doesn't say- Oh no! Of course you need water. Let's discover the solution together. Instead he says - Stop testing me, and by extension God.

The people persist in their grasp toward water, fearful of the implications of going without liquids for too long, easily suspicious that more pain is underfoot. Have you brought us out here only to kill us, Moses? Are you simply another Pharaoh? Fear has been such a part of their equation that it cannot help but appear again. Such are the scars of trauma, slavery, and oppressive powers, whatever the other, more recent demonstrations of substance.

Just as they are not ready to trust Moses, Moses appears unprepared to lead. He turns the people's complaint into his own protest to God, telling God not of the common need for water but of his fears of being killed by the ones he's been entrusted to free. Again notice Moses' interpretation of the situation. He asks not "What can I do to help your people" but "What am I going to do about them?" We might call this a failure of leadership. Leaders listen well, build trust, and attend to needs. Or you might call this a crisis of the whole community: the people are scared, the landscape is extreme, the stakes are high, and the dialogue collapses.

And so God steps in. Unlike Moses, God isn't worried about the personal effects of the community's grumbling. Unlike the community, God is sure a water source is readily available. He instructs Moses to take some other leaders, a visible reminder that Moses has support. Then invites Moses to hold up the staff that parted the Nile. Here a visible reminder of what he had done in the past. And then, hit the rock. Hit the solid rock that seems unlikely to have water. But the healing, sweet-smelling, life-giving water comes. It is a miracle of nourishment by a life-giving God. So assured of this water source is the biblical witness that the text doesn't even tell us specifically that the water flows from the rock. Rather the texts records God's speech, thereby implying the people have what they need. Time and time again across the stories that build our faith a need is articulated and God provides.

There exist extra-biblical stories of the Exodus, stories that are not a part of the scriptural witness, but that imagine with us how the people of faith found sustenance in their desert days.² One of the stories suggest that from this moment forward a miraculously portable water source accompanies the people. It might be a large rock suspended in air that travels alongside them, or a well that mysteriously does the same thing. Whatever the imaginative details, the message remains the same. Human thirst can be, will be, quenched by God's overflowing life-source. We were led out of Egypt not to die but to make it to into the promised land.

² Ibid.

Now the message of the text is easier to preach than to live into, the difficulty comes in carrying on our shoulders a well of trust that God can quench our worries of being abandoned when we are most in need. The anxiety of Israel is replicated by many a faithful sojourner. We, too, can look at our lives, our churches, our national life and ask, “Is the Lord among us, or not?” Is the Lord here, even when we cannot all physically be in the same place? Is the Lord here, as we mourn 200,000 precious lives lost? Is the Lord among us, when there is a deep pain about our broken past, deep anxiety about our future? Is the Lord among us, or not?

Israel routinely voiced this question. And this instance of questioning their encounter with God was given the tag line. It was a moment of faltering faith, a moment of testing God, quarreling with one another and displaying unfaithfulness.³ Why such a harsh characterization?

By linking a demand for water with a question about God’s reliability after having experienced God’s provisions, Israel demonstrated a forgetfulness about what God has already done. God had parted the sea. God had rained manna down from heaven. God had turned bitter pool into drinkable water source. Still, yet again, the people entered camp, demanded water, and expressed a crisis of faith in the gap between cry and God’s fulfillment of their request. By labeling this a story of unfaith, scholars point out, scripture offers a critique of utilitarian religion, a rebuke of a structure of faith whereby God’s faithfulness is judged, as Chris Caldwell states, by God’s “ability to deliver the goods.” In this story, says Joseph Edelheit, “a crisis over water illuminates the lack of faith the people have in themselves, and their destiny. They constantly rebel over the lack of water even as God provides them more than enough to drink.”⁴

We, like Israel, are living through precarious times. We, like Israel, are thirsty – thirsty for trust, guidance, for an easing of harsh environment, and a letting up of our own anxiety. Exodus 17 reminds us that no real relationship is designed to be utilitarian, that trust cannot thrive in an environment where what we mean to each other, or what God means to us, is measured by how well another fulfills my demands. That is a recipe for disaster. So let this story stand a moment in which we think anew about elements of our lives: the need for leadership, and how and when we might lead others, the need to break through relational crises with – what does God display – listening heart, a patience with anxiety, a willingness to do the things that build trust, and always an aim to safeguard life. The place to begin, as people of faith, is with a shared remembering of all that God has done, all that God has entrusted to us to accomplish, and moving forward with confident trust that what God will reliably provide is a deep, at times miraculous, source of those things that bring life.

³ Newson, Carol, “Exegetical Perspective on Exodus 17:1-7” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A Vol. 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 74-79.

⁴ Edelheit, “A Midrash on Water.”