

Exodus 17:1-7
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“Thirsty”

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On sabbatical exactly four years ago this month, I spent time in the Arizona desert, south of Tucson, just a few miles north of Nogales. The leaders of the Desert Aid project I was involved with warned us about the vital importance of keeping up with our hydration. They said “you need to drink at least twice as much water as you usually do, and then you need to drink more. Remember to drink water before you feel thirsty.” Each day we would be hiking 4-8 miles in hot treacherous mountain paths through the desert and we would need a lot of extra hydration.

I thought I would be ok because I drink a lot of water even here in Milwaukee. And in the desert, I followed the advice to drink twice as much as normal. I had also brought little packs of powdered sports drink to mix with the water and for the first couple days I thought I was doing fine. The Third day we returned from a long hike and I started drinking... and could not stop. That evening over a 4- to 5-hour period I drank over 2 gallons of water much of it mixed with powdered sports drink. I didn't realize how thirsty I was, until, well I was.

Today in Exodus, we meet Moses, Aaron and God's people wandering in the desert of Sinai. They are thirsty, so thirsty that the people on this liberation march were starting to reconsider how the hard, enslaved labor back in Egypt was looking better than dying in the desert.

You would think that some good memories would help the people trust God... These are the people who survived ALL 10 plagues, escaped Egypt with the treasures of their former slave masters, walked through the parted waters of the Red Sea, and just chapter earlier complained about hunger and God sent manna and quail-- Is it possible this group could forget the providence and love of God and yearn to return to slavery?

Yes, of course it's possible. Humankind has this rebellious penchant to think we have to be in control. We have the need to know where we are going and control our path. We have the need to know when, where and how our next meal will come. We recognize ourselves in these complaints? Most of us aren't too far away from the crying child on a family car trip who asks, when the next gas station will be, and when the reply comes “I don't know,” the child's crying escalates. We are all too aware of our own times being shortsighted, when we have forgotten God's numerous gifts in our life and figured we were done for because **WE** didn't know what was next. Today in Exodus the issue the people want to know about is water.

Water has become quite the issue in our world today. Located just 300 miles from the Pine Ridge Reservation our church has visited on mission trips, people from the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and allies from across the country concerned in part about protecting the water coming to their reservation; have been protesting for months a proposed pipeline that would cross through their land, and very near their water sources. We heard of lead issues in the water in Flint, Michigan which have caused municipalities around this nation, including here in

Milwaukee, to consider ways to assure our water is safe for human consumption. We hear of droughts in California affecting major agricultural producers and having a detrimental effect on the economic and environmental health of that state. Some scientists are suggesting that within the next 2-3 decades 4 billion people worldwide could be effected by water shortages. Locally there is always the ongoing debate of whether lake Michigan water should be piped out to regions further west. We may need to consider that water is a bigger issue facing our world than oil?

As we turn back to Exodus, tension between Moses and the people is not new. And yet, time and time again God has said yes. They cried out from slavery and God sent a simple shepherd, Moses to deliver them. Trapped on the banks of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army closing in on them; God made a way through. Starving to death in the Wilderness God sent manna and quail. And yet, thirsty and suffering they forget God's Yes and complain to Moses.

And here we encounter the human predicament. Is God with us or not? When we lose control, and don't know our next steps, when the future looks bleak, hope disappears from our horizon, Suffering replaces contentment, it is easy for us to complain, to quarrel, to doubt...even with God. Faith in God requires that we repeatedly choose to follow God in good times and bad.

Interestingly, Moses names this place where God's people complain calling it Massah and Meribah. Massah means place of testing. Meribah means place of quarelling. In naming the place this way Moses affirms for all of us how faith in God will not come easily. God's people then and now will participate in complaining, quarreling and doubting God. And in this story we see no sign that God is upset with the people's complaints or their fragile devotion.

That's good because most of us have been there; crying out to God, feeling cheated, feeling unloved, feeling unappreciated or alone. Most local churches have been there also – worried about the future? About challenges, about money, about ministry, about conflict? Wondering is God with us or not?

We have a choice to make. We can give up, or we can hold on. We can assume we know better than God, or we can follow trusting there will be refreshing streams of hope and healing nearby, even though we can't see them. Faith sort of reminds me of an Ethiopian Proverb we read in bible study this week, "The Fool is Thirsty in the Midst of Water."

Moses gets water from a rock. He reveals a God with the people once again. God working through simple, fragile, human beings like Moses, like you and me. Maybe, God working through ordinary people to fulfill God's extraordinary Will is more of a "miracle" than God fracturing the laws of nature.

If we look a little closer, we see God has been preparing Moses to lead his people all along. As a shepherd Moses learned the desert's geography. He learned its sparse fruits and shady tree regions. He became a bushman who could live off the land. He learned how to surmount

many desert threats to human existence. And it seems likely that spending 40 years in a peninsula only 200 miles wide, Moses knew that in certain places water lay just beyond the limestone and dust. God had been preparing him for this difficult moment all along.

So in closing I wonder could the process Moses used to respond to the people's complaints of being thirsty, serve as an example to us when we arrive in the massah and mirabahs of our life? Here's what Moses did... 1) He prayed – a brief, humble, frightened prayer in plain words. 2) He listened – as God reminded him that he possessed many tools he would need to solve his problem; his staff which had struck the Nile was still in his hand, and the rock from which water would flow was nearby... and finally, 3) He trusted God. That's a pretty good example... when we decide to follow it.

Amen.