

“Water from a Rock”
Exodus 17:1-7
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
Sermon #72
17th Sunday After Pentecost
29th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
9.27.20

Exodus 17:1-7 CEB

17 The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the Lord commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. **2** The people argued with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses said to them, “Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?”

3 But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?”

4 So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me.”

5 The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel’s elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd’s rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. **6** I’ll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink.” Moses did so while Israel’s elders watched. **7** He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the Lord, asking, “Is the Lord really with us or not?”

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

If you're feeling deja vu about this passage, you're right. I'm not only talking about the Israelites forgetting about God delivering them. Although, there is definitely that present in this passage. I'm not talking about complaining. Although, there is definitely that in this passage. I'm not talking about Moses' anger or God's gracious response to a fickle people. Although, that is there.

The last time I preached this passage was March 15, 2020. The first Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic. I was fresh off of my travels from Dallas, Texas for a class reunion. And in the middle of

what was to be a joyful occasion, our world changed. Most, if not all, of us felt a heavy burden come upon us. Yet, in a room full of theologically educated people, no one in that room could imagine the horror that was about to come. No one in that room could imagine such a nightmare scenario. It was the same sense of despair I felt 19 years ago as a 15 year old on September 11, 2001. Things would never be the same. Things could not be ignored.

And in the 28 Sundays that have occurred since March 15th, every single one of us in our country and world has suffered some sort of emotional and mental distress. I don't care who the person is, how they positively try to spin it, or try to ignore it. Our way of life ended on Wednesday, March 11, 2020.

The worst part of all of this, though, is the indifference of a significant portion of the United States that looks at the deaths of 200,000 people and says: “So what?” And unfortunately, some of those in that “so what” camp hold lots of power. Yet, I shouldn’t be surprised that as it stands, a lot of people think 200,000 isn’t such a big deal. Human life has little value in our society because if it did, we would have stricter policies during this pandemic.

200,000 people. That’s when you add up the wars in Korea and Vietnam, gun deaths in 2018, and drug overdoses in 2018.¹ That’s when you add up twenty Jones Counties. That’s when you add up two Craven Counties. That’s one Onslow County. I’m giving you these statistics because we can’t forget. We can’t forget. We can’t

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<https://abcnews.go.com/US/200000-americans-died-coronavirus-grim-milestone-context/story?id=729127>

go numb. None of this is normal. Where is the LORD? Is the LORD really with us or not?

And life wasn't normal for the Hebrews. They were on the move. More time has passed since they were complaining about the lack of food in the desert and expressed a desire to go back to Egypt where they had their fill of meat and bread. Now, as they set up camp in Rephidim, there is no water. They complain! They blame Moses and *again* they wonder why they couldn't have just died in Egypt!

And Moses does what any good leader does: Gets angry and expresses that anger to God: "What should I do with these people? They are getting ready to stone me!" Moses has the wisdom to go

straight to God. Moses has the wisdom to act with compassion whereas his flock did not. Instead of trying to work with Moses who is doing what God has asked him to do, the people lash out. They try to use him as their punching bag.

And what does God do? The same thing God does whenever the children complain: Graciously provide for them. But, God does something else for Moses. God gives Moses an opportunity to let out some anger on a rock in front of some elders and God, too.

Take in your hand the shepherd's rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go.

I'll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb.

Hit the rock.

Moses needed to vent, I'm sure. The elders needed to see Moses' anger. And God was and is big enough to take that anger. God gave Moses a coping mechanism. God gave Moses the rock to strike.

Why was Moses angry? The complaining didn't help. The corporate amnesia didn't help. First and foremost, however, it was the fact the people truly thought they had been abandoned by God and were starting to give up on each other and they found an easy target: Moses.

Moses' life in itself is a testimony that God never abandons. His being rescued by women points to God's work in the midst of tragedy. Moses fleeing to Midian then coming back is proof that

while God's timing is not our own, God is still up to something even during suffering. God's dramatic displays of power that brought Egypt to its knees so the Hebrews could escape is proof that they were never abandoned. The quail and bread that the LORD provided in the wilderness is proof that God is still good on God's promises.

And times are tough AGAIN! And already, there is dissension among the people. The people had forgotten who they were and whose they were. They had forgotten that their lives belonged to God who demanded one thing: To love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

God's chosen people were choosing chaos over God's peace.

They were seeking bondage over God's freedom. In the short time they had been away, the Israelites were starting to forget.

And God, out of God's love and compassion that never ends, provided water from the unlikeliest of places: A rock in Horeb. Out in the desert, it wasn't an oasis that the children found water, but a rock.

In the midst of tragedy we are facing, where is the rock God is leading us to find water? In the midst of losing 200,000 Americans with approximately 800,000 more lives around the world and counting, where is the rock God is leading us to find water?

I'm not blaming God. God is not the scapegoat. Humanity and its leaders have failed during this crisis. Instead of a coordinated response around the world, it's a piecemeal response that's not working. For those who try to keep the common good in mind, they are the ones, like Moses, who get blamed.

Yet, in my despair and in my own anger, I know God hasn't abandoned us. God has given us the compassionate nurses, doctors, scientists, and countless others who recognize the love of God, neighbor, and self, even if they don't happen to believe in the same things I do. God has given us the compassionate givers to support vital ministries as we continue through this wilderness as we are led to the rock that will give us the water we need.

God has also given us the coping mechanisms. God has given us the counselors, therapists, exercise regimen, moments of escape in nature, and the actual punching bags. God has not given us each other as punching bags like our ancestors did to Moses. God is right here with us as we figure a way out of this mess together.

Don't give into helplessness. Don't become numb. Don't become cynical. Don't forget, even though it's human nature to forget. Be refreshed by that water that only comes from God in the unlikeliest of places like the rock at Horeb in the middle of a vast wilderness.

Where is your water from the rock? What are the healthy coping mechanisms God has given you to face each day? Where are the moments you realize God is right there?

The LORD is with us. Don't ever forget that.

And that is some Good News, friends.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.