

*“Stay Hydrated”*

*Psalm 78; Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13*

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*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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*“Water, water, everywhere and all the boards did shrink  
Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink.”*

This familiar couplet is from *“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The mariner is stranded in the open ocean. The boards of the wooden ship shrink from lack of rain. The mariner becomes ever thirstier since, without rain, the only available water is the ocean’s salt water that surrounds him.

This couplet came to me recently for a different reason. It was not that there was no water to drink. There was plenty and my father didn’t drink it. Many of you know, and have prayed for, my 91 year old father who was hospitalized due to dehydration on September 8<sup>th</sup>. We worked outside that day, he and I, too long and with too little hydration. Thank you for your prayers and inquiries. Dad is mostly recovered and is greatly blessed by my two younger brothers, both of whom live 20 minutes away from the home Dad and Mom built in 1956 in Harford County, Maryland and in which Dad still lives. God is good! All the time! I’m looking forward to heading down again on Columbus Day.

A brief irony in this sermon entitled “Stay Hydrated” is that this theme was chosen far ahead of this episode of dehydration. And if you have not yet read Parish Nurse Brenda Pineau’s October “Beacon” article on dehydration—also written without knowledge of my dad’s episode—please do. Frankly, I was sure at the moment he lost consciousness that it was either a stroke or heart attack. Dehydration is serious!

Right? We know that water and other non-alcoholic clear liquids flush toxins, curb appetite and assist kidney function.

Hydration is essential to all exercise and weight loss programs. With our bodies composed of 98% water, it makes sense.

So the complaining of the Israelites in today's story from Exodus 17 comes as no surprise. None of us are in a hurry to die, especially of thirst. *"Moses, whadda ya doin'?" We gotta stay hydrated. Why'd ya bring us out here to die of thirst?"*

So Moses, who seems stuck for an answer to the people's lament, complains to God. God tells Moses to take the staff with which he struck the Nile and go ahead with leaders to the rock at Horeb. How awesome is this? Very awesome! First, "Horeb" is another name for "Sinai." It's a sacred place. Read ahead three chapters and you'll find Moses there again, this time on the top receiving the Ten Commandments. So in the midst of complaints and questions God says, in effect, *"Come closer to my holiness."*

Second, God tells Moses to use the staff with which he struck the Nile. It was the first plague that ultimately resulted in Israelite freedom. To get hard-hearted Pharaoh to release the Israelite slaves, Moses struck the Nile with the staff and it ran red with blood, unfit to drink (Exodus 7:17-21). In today's delightful reversal, the same staff is used to strike the rock in front of the hard-headed former slaves to bring water gushing from the rock.

I'm not a geologist so won't go beyond my knowledge for those who'd like something more logical as explanation for this story. But even laymen know that underground water often finds its way to the surface through fissures in bedrock.

Whether explained physically or metaphysically, it's a great ending. But it's a short-term solution to a long-term problem. It meets the immediate crisis but doesn't resolve the underlying issue, which is the Israelite's lack of faith in a God who provides. The question that echoes is *"Is the Lord among us or not?"*

That's where today's Psalm comes in. The Psalmist recalls this episode about 1,000 years later. *"Look,"* the Psalmist says in

effect. *“God did all this great stuff: divided the seas, led with a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, made water to come out of the rock, defeated the Ephraimites, and still they don’t get it.”* And then this verse: *“They forgot the deeds of the Lord.”* (Ps. 78:11a). It’s the Israelites version of *“What have you done for me lately?”*

We are so much like them for totally understandable reasons. If we’ve known destitution, the memory remains. If we are in crisis, we feel it defining us instead of understanding *“This, too, shall pass.”* If we are afraid, it can be hard to think clearly and to remember we’ve come through before and will again.

The Israelites complaint is legitimate. If you don’t stay hydrated, you die. That’s a fact. The bottled water this morning is a reminder that spiritual and physical reality are intertwined. It is also a reminder that we can be physically fine and spiritually parched. Are we just nerve endings and cerebellum, 98% water and 2% chemicals, beating heart and pulsing blood? No. Beyond survival we yearn for acceptance, for love, for meaning and, whether we know it or not, for the God who gives these and far more than we could ever think to ask. As Pastor Hal reminded the attendees of our leadership conference three weeks ago and in the words of St. Augustine, *“Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.”*

Speaking of Pastor Hal, I heard him ask Mary Lou Hastings for a match before his Tuesday night study and I said, *“Me and Superman, that’s a match.”* Pastor Hal retorted, *“That’s my line. I say I haven’t had a match since Superman died.”* And, no, Pastor Hal did not know this was coming.

But this exchange about Superman reminded me of Christopher Reeve, one of the better known actors who played the role of Superman, whose spinal cord injury in 1995 led to a decade of public advocacy for spinal cord victims before his 2004 death. Interviewed by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Reeve said, *“I think life is a set of obstacles you must overcome. If overcoming*

*obstacles is a happy experience, like a game, you become a happy person. It's when that effort becomes overwhelming that it leads to depression, failure, inactivity."*

What interests me is that Reeve said this in 1982, **13 years before his devastating accident.** He understood life is filled with obstacles so that when life dealt him one of the cruelest, he had prepared spiritually. He was ready to strike the rock of obstacles to release what he needed to keep going. As debilitating as Reeve's accident was, he inspired millions before his death.

What brings us to rest in God is understanding at the outset that our journey has God as our destination. Otherwise we always wander around thirsty. The surprise ending to the story is that the rock, which looked hard and unyielding, gave up the very water the people needed to survive. By faith and trust, that is true of the "rocks" of our lives, too.

So how do we get this spiritual water of faith and trust? The answer is in Paul's letter to the Philippians. When we are dying of thirst in a spiritual desert, we are to have the same mind that was in Christ: of encouragement, consolation, compassion and love. We are to have the mind that was in Christ who, *"Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited."* We are to have the mind that was in Christ, who was obedient even to death on a cross.

Friends, even Jesus suffered.

Even Jesus said, *"I thirst."*

Even Jesus said, *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."*

Even Jesus said, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Even Jesus said, *"It is finished."*

Even Jesus said, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."*

Jesus knows that parched place in our souls because he's been there. And we have a friend in him! As we just sang:

*Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?  
**Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.***

So take it to Jesus, who is “*our help in every time of trouble.*”

Take it to Jesus, who is “*the rock of our salvation.*”

Take it to him who said “*I am the bread of life*”

Take it to him who bore “*the dreadful curse for my soul.*”

Take it to him who “*laid aside his crown for my soul.*”

Take it to him who is the “*living water*” who becomes “*a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*”

Take it to him whose name “*is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure.*”

Take it to Jesus! For when you take it to him you will have a spring of life, a spring of refreshment, a spring of hydration: now, today, and forever!