

“Water from the Rock”

Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13

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In the Exodus story today, the nation of Israel has needs. The people are very clear in their complaint. They are thirsty in the desert, and they tell Moses *“Give us water to drink.”*

We are sometimes tempted to ridicule Israel for their complaining. They had seen more communal evidence of God than most of us will ever see. Plagues against Pharaoh and their Egyptian captors lead to freedom from 400 years of slavery. They escape miraculously through the Red Sea as Pharaoh’s cavalry is destroyed. And they are provided food in the form of quail and manna, that light, frost-like bread.

Today they’re complaining again. Yet their needs are real. Water in the desert is not a luxury. It’s a necessity. And they’re traveling on foot, a whole nation, with children and aging parents and the sick and disabled. Most of us would agree that refugees – in whatever place and time – are the most miserable of all peoples. We hear this in the wake of so many natural disasters this summer and fall. If anyone has a right to complain, refugees do. So it’s tough to get hard on Israel for asking for what they need.

We, too, have needs, although at times we complain for far less reason than Israel. We feel put out if we miss our favorite TV show or the toothpaste disappears or an appliance breaks down. Yet some needs ***are*** great. We need employment, shelter, food, clothing, health care. When circumstances threaten these needs we complain to one another and to God.

God never minds us bringing our needs to God. Jesus taught that *“your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* (Matthew 6:8b) He also reminded us that if we, imperfect and sinful as we are, know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will God give those who ask. (Luke 11:13). Certainly God’s gracious desire is to feed, clothe, care for and nurture all God’s children: young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight, suburban and urban and all the colors of the rainbow. All means all.

But as we see in the story, human agency is involved, too. In this instance, the agent is Moses, following God’s command: *“Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”* The focus of this sermon is not on the miracle of water from the rock. Still, it is worth pointing out that scientists have found miniscule amounts of water in the earth’s mantle, which has been the basis of discoveries of water on both Earth’s moon and the planet Mars. (1) The particular phenomenon of striking a rock to produce water involves breaking a fragile crust, created by desert climate, of some rocks in the Middle Eastern desert. This phenomenon is described by Colin Humphreys, Department of Science and Metallurgy at Cambridge University, in his book *The Miracles of Exodus – a Scientist’s Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories.* (2)

The problem with Israel was not that they were whiners but that they had lost faith in their leader and, by Moses’ interpretation, in God. They have forgotten (Exodus 16:3) the oppression of slavery and remembered only its comforts. They

- (1) www.pri.org/stories/2015-01-10/how-earth-made-its-own-water-out-rocks
- (2) www.europhysicsnews.org/articles/eptn/pdf/2005/03/eptn05306.pdf (Note to on-line readers: this link did not work simply clicking on it, but will work typed into a browser).

did not petition God in prayer. They did not thank God for all God already done for them. They wondered what God had done for them lately. They questioned Moses' integrity, accusing him of bringing them out of Egypt to kill them with thirst. They forgot God's desire to save their nation and save their souls.

Sadly, it *is* easy to forget. When you are thirsty, hot, cranky and the children keep asking "Are we there yet?," it's easy to forget. When the flies are thick and you haven't bathed in a month and the camels are turning away when *you* come near, it's hard to stay calm and say: "this is salvation." When you have little children who are sick and elderly parents who are frail and the leader of your hiking expedition doesn't seem to know what direction the crow flies, it's hard to sing with any gusto: *"O God, our help in ages past our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home."*

So this Exodus story is about short-term memory loss and complaining and quarreling, for Israel and for us. Yet the story is even more about the persistence of God. As much as the story is about the faithlessness of Israel it is even more about the faithfulness of God. What God did, in the short term, was to call on the faith of Moses to be sufficient for the faith of Israel. God called on Moses to over-function in the moment of crisis to remind the people of God's faithfulness. Keep in mind where this is happening. Verse 6 tells us that this is *"at Horeb,"* which is another name for Mount Sinai, which is where Moses had his "burning bush" experience that forever turned his life around from running from leadership to running towards leadership.

This is not the end of Moses' leadership story, of course. Moses learns that he can't over-function indefinitely. That is a formula for burnout. Instead, he continues to evolve in his understanding of leadership, aided by his father-in-law, Jethro. The next chapter, Exodus 18, is the story of that evolution in

Moses' understanding and the prescription that helps Israel shift from being complainers led by a charismatic leader to a team of leaders who are willing to not only diagnose, but help solve, problems; and to see problems as opportunities.

For those who are called to lead this means that it won't always be easy and it won't always be appreciated but it will always be **from** God if we return **to** God: in prayer, in spiritual disciplines, to the place in our life journey where we first encountered the Living God. God will lead those who lead if those who lead humble themselves before God. This is the model for those who are disciples of Jesus:

“(He) emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him....” (Phil. 2:7-9a)

God will sustain us in our time of need. Water from the rock comes by the power of God and through those willing to work as human agents for the purposes of God. God is faithful. Let us be faithful, too, whether as leaders or as followers and most often as both. Let us be faithful: in prayer, in stewardship, in service. By such our needs will surely be met. And we will then be sustained to meet and serve those others who have needs, and need us, too. Amen.