

Exodus 17:1-7 New Revised Standard Version

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

We're starting a new sermon series today called Enemies of Gratitude. We're going to be talking about the things that keep us from being truly grateful. You know, when we focus on how things could be or how things used to be better. Or when we focus on how we're not getting what we think we deserve or when life's struggles keep us down. Enemies of gratitude are all that prevent us from seeing all the blessings that are right in front of us.

Today, we focus on when we glorify the past blinding us to the blessings that are in the present. In our scripture we went way back. Way back to when an entire nation, thousands of people, survived slavery at the hands of the Egyptians. God made a way for the Israelites through the Red Sea saving them from certain death. The Spirit of God blew back the waters of the sea to reveal dry land creating an exit where no one imagined. God gave them a path to freedom. Then, Moses led them as they ate manna from heaven, but now they are thirsty. The people didn't know Moses. He didn't grow up among them.

The Israelites have left everything they knew behind them in Egypt to follow a man they don't really know at all into a barren, dangerous wilderness at the chance of maybe someday reaching this fabled promised land. People are getting sick and weak. People are dying. Children are begging for just a sip of cool water to soothe their dry, sandy mouths. But, there is no water in sight. There is no God in sight. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Just a few chapters before, the Israelites had been dancing with gratitude before God (Exodus 15). Every child of Israel sang a song of praise before God. But, now they are thirsty and they are in a desert. They don't want to go forward, so they start to get nostalgic about being back in slavery, at least then they weren't in the desert! This is one of the signs that you have really lost it: when you start to idealize your past, and your past involved being a slave to the Egyptian Pharaoh: "Back in the good ol' days, when we spent all day making bricks and building pyramids, when we had no rights, and the Pharaoh occasionally killed all our male children, those were the days."¹

In slavery, every day was the same. The other day my daughter asked me if I remembered April. She didn't remember anything that we had done in April. I told her we didn't do anything in April! I don't want to compare what we are going through now to slavery, but there is something comfortable about suffering. It is predictable. Freedom can be much more trying.

It was so hard to get used to our isolation when it started, and now it's so hard to remember how life used to be. The Israelites had gotten trapped in rosy revisions of their past. Have you done that before? When you forget all of the bad stuff and make the past better than it

¹ A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. P. 66

was? God had been providing for them right and left but the Israelites are so numb that they can't see it. They are trapped between these spiritual lands of Massah which means test and Meribah which means find fault. Moses is able to draw water from a rock showing the people that God is with them and God is never going to let them go. God will provide, but they grumble and grumble and go in circles for forty years. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

That's the thing about nostalgia, it never leads you forward. Nostalgia casts a candy-coated, much improved version of what once was. Nostalgia for the Israelites is Egypt 2.0, with the warts and the thorns removed. What we are going through in the present can never match up with an idealized past. Then we are stuck in the quicksand of our edited memories and we become perpetually ungrateful for the place we now find ourselves.

I felt pretty ungrateful lately. Someone told me this week that they want to go straight to 2022 because 2021 sounds like it isn't going to be any better. I want to cling to before when life was better. It was better before, right? Nostalgia has this way of quietly stealing our joy and making us indifferent to the flowing streams of living water that God has provided here in the wilderness. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

In the quarantine, I have started riding my bike more and more. Our old youth minister Gary Fox posted on Facebook that he was riding 50 miles a week and I asked him 1) how he found time to ride that much and 2) if I could ride with him. We went riding this week and I was telling him that I love that when I'm riding my bike I have to pay attention. I can't listen to music or listen to a podcast. I can't put in my headphones because I am going fast and I might fall over and hurt myself or someone else. I love that when I'm riding my bike, I have to pay attention to the road right in front of me. I can't focus on the road up ahead, I can look up ahead briefly, but then I have to focus on what is right in front of me. We were talking about our lives now and how there is less busyness. The last six months have given us an opportunity to slow down and to spend more time in quiet.

Right now it feels like we are in the wilderness depending on God because we are in uncharted territory. We don't know what the future holds and that can make us anxious or numb. The Israelites woke up every day trusting that God was going to lead them somewhere. The Israelites that we read about don't make it to the promised land. Maybe their nostalgia won't let them get there. Freedom and hope are waiting but we have to stop pretending that the past was perfect. The past was not perfect, and the future might not be perfect either, but we have to walk in faith toward God's future.

I wonder what would have happened if the people hadn't complained and demanded a sign of God's presence? "Is the Lord among us or not?" Imagine if the Israelites had waited, remembering the manna, praying and hoping a little longer. Imagine it's a week later and the people are so worn down and so thirsty that death seems inevitable. Then, there is a noise, a drop of water. It's not a rain storm but a long shower of water. Imagine all of those people standing with their faces tilted toward the sky, mouths open to catch what they can. Imagine their relief. Then, after the shock is gone, they run to gather something to hold the rainwater. They know the rain won't last long, but it will be enough. God is present with them and God will provide.

Imagine the harsh conditions continue and people refuse to go one step further. They are not going to leave this spot. They set up camp, some are giving up and some are resting. Children begin to dig just for fun. Faster and faster and then the children realize the dirt and rocks beneath their fingers are wet. There is water deep below and the children stop to laugh and the adults come running and they dig a well.

“Is the Lord among us or not?” That is what we always ask when we are trying to maintain a faithful direction in the wilderness. Maybe if the Israelites had asked this question more, there would be fewer golden calves in their story. There isn’t anything wrong with the question. The problem is where they look for the answer. They are looking for a miracle, for God to create life where there is only the possibility of death. They are looking for a miracle in something impossible and sudden – like water pouring forth from a rock. There is a miracle in this story, but it isn’t that water appears out of nowhere from a rock. The miracle is that the water was there all along. Deep beneath the soil or in a soft rain days away. The water has always been there, since God created the earth.

The whole world is a miracle of God’s presence. We want a God who pops in when things get really bad, but God is always present with us. Sometimes we pray for rain and sometimes we have to dig wells, but God is always there. That is the miracle. Our world is filled with injustice and conflict. Our lives are filled with pain, loneliness, and doubt. We thirst for hope and comfort. “Is the Lord among us or not?” We don’t need Moses and his staff to bring God to us. We only to look around and dare to see God everywhere in this world, even in the most unlikely places and even in each other. God’s presence showers down upon us, God’s presence carries our faith like a reservoir in the dry seasons of our life. God’s presence is with us as we bring a cup of water to friends, neighbors, and even enemies that they may drink when their own cup is empty. “Is the Lord among us or not?” Always, thanks be to God. Amen.