

Exodus 17:1-7 Pastor Bill Uetricht 3/19/17 3 Lent

Contrary to many of my colleagues, I often preach on the first lesson, a reading that for the most part comes from the Old Testament. And I think that is due to the fact that for me the Old Testament is often so real, so relatable. I read many Old Testament stories finding myself smiling or nodding my head, as if I have been there before, as if I experienced this before. Now you may find that odd because the Old Testament contains so many folklorish tales and larger-than-life experiences—talking snakes, fish that swallow people, rocks that gush water after they have been tapped. But realness is not discovered simply in historical happenings. If it were, parables and poetry would not be very meaningful. Many Old Testament stories, sometimes wild as they are, have this ability to connect us to who we really are, how we really act, and how God is connected to it all.

The people of Israel have left Egypt, and they find themselves in the middle of the desert, camping at Rephidim, an oasis. There's a problem. They don't have any water. And that's no small problem. You know as well as I do that human beings can't live very long without water. So these thirsty, desperate Israelites get mad with Moses, their leader; they begin with quarreling with him. Here's a behavior we've seen before: get mad at the leader when things aren't going so well. Those who lead will tell you that this occurs often. Anxiety in the community will bring out anger directed at the leaders. Demand for water becomes critique of Moses' leadership. "Give us water to drink," they angrily say to Moses.

Well, Moses, typical human being that he is, reacts. "Why do you quarrel with me?" he asks the people. Most of us respond to attack with reaction. We get a little defensive. Well, Moses decides that their issue isn't fully with him. And yes, we can relate. Most of people's issues aren't with the leader or with other people. Their issues often go deeper. "Why do you test the Lord?" Moses reframes the question. "Why are you taking on God?"

Well, the answer is quite obvious--because they are thirsty. They need something to drink. So they complain some more, not toward God but toward Moses, upping the ante. I am sure you have never done this in an argument. "Are you just like the Pharaoh, Moses? Did you bring us out of Egypt only to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

It's all very real, isn't it? Overstating the case. All of a sudden, it's not about the situation at hand, but the intent of other people. When we get in an anxious state, when stress and anger take over, we do a lot of big-scale interpreting of other people and their behavior. What was about thirst now becomes about a perceived desire on the part of Moses to bring the people to ruin. Don't tell me that you can't relate to this!

And don't think that this kind of behavior is limited to the non-leadership types. Moses, after the people verbally attack him, questioning his motives, goes to God and says, "What shall I do with *this* people? They are almost ready to stone me!" There is no indication that the rabble is picking up stones, poised to strike Moses with them. Anxiety produces reaction, overreaction sometimes. Critique is translated: they are prepared to murder me.

It's not unusual for us to deal with critique in this way. We hear people's words of criticism, and we think people are talking about *who we are*. They are not just critiquing our behavior; they are taking on *us*, which precipitates a response from us. "Nobody loves me; they are all out to get me." And such a response brings emotional distancing: "What shall I do with **this** people. They aren't *my* people. They aren't *your* people. They are **this** people. Don't tell me that you can't relate!

So God who experiences all of this complaining, bickering, anger, and anxiety decides to respond. The God we talk about is not apathetic. The Greeks spoke of God as an "unmoved mover." That is not the Old Testament—and I would say Biblical—God. In fact, the Biblical God, especially in the Old Testament, is anything but apathetic. He gets angry. He's moved in his gut. He changes his mind about what

he is going to do. But in this case, he simply responds, although you get the sense from other interpretive readings of this event that he might not be overly pleased with the Israelites' behavior. If we had read fully our Psalm for today we would have heard a major critique of the people who are whining in the wilderness: "Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me and put me to the proof. For forty years I loathed that generation . . . In my anger I swore, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

So, according to the Psalm, God got pretty ticked off. The people didn't trust him. And God said that is why the Israelites had to wander in the wilderness for such a long time—for forty years. When you don't trust, you wander for a long time!

But still, God in our reading responds to the complaining with what people wanted and needed: water. He tells Moses to go ahead of the people, bringing the leadership team—leaders are meant to be out in front of the people, bringing about new things for them. And then Moses is told he is to strike a rock at Mt. Horeb, that is, Mt. Sinai, from which water will flow. Sure enough, Moses did that, and water flowed. Normally, water comes from the sky, but in this case, God brings it out of the ground. Life in God will always surprise you.

And then, so the story goes, Moses names the places where all of this happened, calling them Massah and Meribah—"fussin' and fightin,'" because that is clearly what the people had been up to when the water flowed up from the ground. I wonder if we are ever that honest when it comes to our naming reality. Are we ever bold enough to tell the truth about what created so much in our lives or in our culture? Or will we cover it all up with nice little names? Look it's alcoholism or abuse that shaped this family. It's racism that explains why this neighborhood or community is the way that it is. We may not be so bold, but the Old Testament, in all of its realness, was.

Actually, the Old Testament is so real that it ends our story with the fundamental question that the people of Israel were asking when

they were dealing with their thirst, the fundamental question that real people ask all the time, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Sometimes it doesn’t feel like it. Sometimes God feels far off. Sometimes our situations make us wonder if indeed we are not abandoned, that God is only a dream that other people have. The Old Testament is bold and real enough to ask the question that all humans ask at one point or another.

Now I have to say that the Old Testament has a response to the question. It cares that we respond to that question with, “Yes, God is among us.” If you read Exodus, especially what comes just before our reading for the day, you will discover that this is not the first time that the Israelites found themselves “fussin’ and fightin.’” They had complained about water before. They whined to Moses about the bitterness of the water. Moses took care of that. And they had also just complained about lack of food. In the wilderness, they missed all the good food in Egypt. They said, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! You have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger!”

Again, God heard their complaint. He was a bit unconventional, without a doubt. Food normally comes from the ground, but he sent it from heaven. Bread from heaven was theirs. They were fed.

Sometimes faith is a matter of moving beyond amnesia. Sometimes faith is remembering. Oh ya, we made it through that. Oh ya, life didn’t overcome us. Oh ya, we were fed. Oh ya, we had what we needed. Oh ya, we were not abandoned. Oh ya, we were surrounded by people, resources that we could never imagine. Oh ya, God was among us. Sometimes faith involves memory, remembering. Sometimes faith entails getting over amnesia.

Frankly, we as Christians gather week after week to remember, to get over our amnesia. We gather to remember the story of Jesus, whom we say and whom the gospel of John says today is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. This one, the eternal word that has become

flesh, is the deepest sign of God among us. This one, the Samaritan woman learns today, is water for the deepest thirsts. This one, who is bold enough to break down the walls that societies of all kinds create, overcome the boundaries that we all establish—this one is a sign that God is among us as one who loves, and who loves the whole world, not just our kind.

Week after week, we gather to remember this one. Sometimes we are prone to forget. Sometimes amnesia takes over. Sometimes we are interested in only our kinds of folks. Sometimes we think *we ourselves* aren't included. Sometimes we real people wonder if God is among us or not, if the God of love is with the world or not. To gather together is to bring to memory Jesus, the sign that the God of love is among us.

Drink in that memory. Drink it in so that your real lives—lives that are soaked with a lot of anxiety, a lot of whining and complaining—may be saturated with the satisfying, God-revealing love that Jesus is. Your remembering, just like the remembering of the Samaritan woman will bear witness that, “Yes, God is among us!”