

Sermon, October 1, 2023

Exodus 17:1-7

“Is the Lord with us or not!”

The Israelites were well into their forty-year journey across the wilderness towards the promised land when they camped at a place called Rephidim but found that there is no water to drink. Parched by their long journey they begin to argue with Moses, once more questioning him as to why he led them out of Egypt only to die of thirst in this seemingly God forsaken place. Note that this all takes place after the Lord has parted the Red Sea and provided bread from heaven in times when they faced great danger, but, once more, their faith seems to fall away, and they begin to question whether the Lord is with them or not.

First, Moses asks why they are quarreling with him, and why were they putting the Lord to the test - a legitimate question considering all that had taken place before. He then cries out to God for help before the people are about to kill him, so the Lord instructs him to take the staff which God had performed wonders at the river Nile and strike the rock at Horeb, from which water begins to flow.

All of this can be seen as analogous to our own experience. Life itself is a journey - a journey that can be filled with many wonderful things, but also may have times when we find ourselves stuck in a wilderness - a wilderness of physical challenges, of mental and emotional upheavals, a wilderness of spiritual darkness. In that wilderness we begin to thirst - a thirst for healing, for happiness and joy, for hope and for love - and we may begin to wonder where God is in all of this. We ask, is the Lord with us or not? These can be the dark nights of the soul, a time when our faith begins to fade - when, in fact, it is when faith is most needed.

In such times we may feel tempted to put God to the test. But what does that mean? Often it means demanding some kind of sign or miracle that can make visible the divine presence. This, of course, stands in contrast to the well-known definition of faith in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews - “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The irony here is that the Israelites had already seen the mighty works of God, yet still faltered in their faith. I guess there are times when we suffer from a short spiritual attention span.

But there are other ways in which we tempt the Lord. For example, during the height of the pandemic there were those who refused to wear masks, keep safe distances, get vaccinated, etc. Why? Because they proclaimed, the Lord would protect them. That, my friends, is putting the Lord to the test! Sometimes, through faith, God miraculously heals, but more often, God works miracles through medicine!

It brings to mind the old story of the man stuck on his rooftop during a great flood. Someone in a rowboat comes over and tells the man to jump in. "No thanks", he said, "I'm praying, and the Lord will save me". Next, someone arrives in a motorboat and offers help. Again, "No thanks, the Lord will help me!" After that, a helicopter arrives, and the pilot calls down and says, "Grab the rope, and I'll take you to safety!" And, once more, "No thanks, the Lord will hear my prayers and keep me safe!" Eventually, the water rises, and the man drowns. He gets to heaven and confronts God. "I cried out to you in faith. Why didn't you save me?" The Lord replied, "I sent you a rowboat, a motorboat, and a helicopter. What else could I do?" Sometimes the Lord acts in mysterious ways - sometimes the Lord acts in the most obvious of ways!

So, Moses struck the rock with his staff with the Lord standing before him, indicating that Moses acts out of faith, but the miracle comes through God. So, what can we expect when we are dying of spiritual thirst? In two passages in the Book of Jeremiah, God is referred to as "a spring of living water." Then in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to the Samaritan woman at the well, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you 'Give me a drink' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." Also, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them". We can think of living water as both the Holy Spirit, and as the Spirit of Christ himself. When we cry out to him and know through faith that the Lord is truly with us streams of living water can flow within washing away our spiritual thirst. Amen.

**Let us pray:** Eternal God, we thank you for this day you have given us, and for all the blessings that come with it. We thank you for your Son Jesus and ask for your help in following as his disciples. We also open our hearts and minds to the infilling of your Holy Spirit so that we may be inspired and strengthened to be the church you would have us be.

Lord, sometimes we falter in our faith, and pray that in your Spirit we may be renewed. We know that you are a God of mercy and forgive us when we fall; and for that we are eternally grateful. In the name of your Son may we be of service to others, especially to those in need. blessings you for having had the opportunity to visit the Neighborhood Center and ask your continued blessing upon the work that they do, reaching out to those who struggle in many ways, and for the homeless . Inspire us to continue our support for their mission, which is in fact your mission, making it the mission to which we are called...Amen.