

"An Unlikely Source of Water"

Exodus 17:1-7

March 23, 2014

3rd Sunday in Lent

It wasn't supposed to be like this! After centuries of praying and hoping as slaves in Egypt, the people of Israel had finally been rescued. God had freed His people from slavery. He led them out of Egypt and miraculously through the Red Sea, drowning their enemies. He promised them a new home, a land flowing with milk and honey. I'm sure they thought it would be smooth sailing for God's people from then on. They just had to zip across the desert of the Sinai Peninsula, enter Canaan, and move into their new digs.

The people of God may think the same thing today. Life should be smooth sailing if you believe in God. All we have to do is zip through the desert of this life, enter into heaven, and move into our new digs.

But life is not like that. There is precious little sailing that is smooth. Life is often rough. We don't do a lot of zipping. Life is full of hang ups and road blocks. Heaven seems so far away at times. The question then becomes: how do you handle life when it is not smooth sailing and is actually quite difficult?

For the Israelites, the answer was obvious: complain. Despite the fact that they had seen the Lord's power and mercy in real and tangible ways – in the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, and so on – when life got rough, they complained, instead of trusting God, their Savior. When the water was bitter at Marah, they complained and made demands of God through Moses. When they had no food, they complained and made demands of God through Moses. In our text, when they had no water, they complained and made demands of God through Moses.

They would also think back to their old way of life and reminisce through rose colored glasses. Despite the fact they had complained about life in Egypt for centuries, when life got rough after the rescue, they immediately thought Egypt was better than their present situation. They asked Moses,

“Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us, and our children and our livestock with thirst.” They would even suggest, at times, going back to Egypt because life was supposedly better there.

Their complaints angered the Lord. Complaints against Moses were counted as complaints against the Lord. They were putting the Lord to the test.

When we read the Old Testament, it is easy to be critical of the people of Israel for their complaining. However, do we ever act like them? We have witnessed God’s grace and mercy many times throughout our lives. When life gets rough – when we suffer physically or are persecuted spiritually – are we tempted to complain, rather than trust the Lord and His care? It is easy to complain that God is not meeting our needs physically or spiritually. Do we look back to our “Egypt” – our former life before God or a life without God – and think that’s better than what we have now? There is a great temptation to try and quench our thirst in the ways of this world because they seem so much better to us than what the Lord offers. So often we put the Lord to the test with our complaining, lack of faith, and desire to return to our former lives.

One might think that the Lord would react angrily to His people’s rebellion, grumbling, and complaining. However, in the case of Israel, the Lord was merciful to His people. He did not wipe them out for complaining about the lack of water, for desiring their former lives in Egypt, or even for putting Him to the test. God provided them with water.

When the people of Israel demanded of Moses, “Give us water to drink,” I’m not sure what the people expected Moses or the Lord to do to solve the problem for the hundreds of thousands of people. Did they expect to find a huge oasis in the desert or a miraculous fresh water sea to suddenly appear before them? Did they expect an unbelievable rain to come to give water to all these people?

I’m pretty sure they weren’t expecting a rock. A rock? Seriously? The Lord commanded Moses to pass before the people, take some of the elders of Israel, take the staff he struck the Nile River back in Egypt, and go to this rock. The Lord said, “Behold, I will stand before you there on the

rock at Horeb.” So the Lord would be present there in and on that rock. The Lord said, “And you will strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” Moses struck the rock with his staff and water flowed out of the rock. This moving flowing water was known as “living water” in Biblical times. And enough came out so that all the people of Israel had water to drink. Their thirst was quenched. Their lives were renewed and invigorated. Their lives were saved from early graves in the desert.

The Lord is even more gracious and merciful to us when we grumble and complain about difficult situations in life rather than believing and trusting Him. He does not wipe us out for complaining, whether it is constant or occasional. He doesn't abandon us when we abandon Him to seek out our “Egypt” and attempt to quench our thirsts in the priorities, passions, and possessions of this world. He doesn't reject us when we threaten to reject Him by putting Him to the test. Like with the Israelites, the Lord provides us with water.

I'm not sure what we expect the Lord to do to satisfy us in our rocky journey through earth's wilderness. What kind of water can He give us to quench our desires and longings? Believe it or not, the Lord directs us to another Rock – the Rock which is Jesus Christ. In recounting this episode in the life of Israel in 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, “our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” (1 Cor. 10:1-4)

Like the Lord was in and on the rock at Horeb, so, too, in Jesus of Nazareth “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” (Col. 2:9) As Moses struck the rock with his staff, so, too, the true Rock, Jesus was struck, only it was not just with a wooden staff. Jesus was struck with the hands of those who beat Him, struck with the whips of those who scourged Him, struck with the nails of those who crucified Him. By these strikings, Jesus died.

This seems like a tragedy compared with Moses striking a rock, yet from the striking of this Rock, Jesus Christ, came great blessing. Because of His death, a fountain of living water flowed forth. This water, used in Holy Baptism, has purified us and made us clean before God by washing away our sin. This water flowing from Jesus has given us a new and invigorated life through the unlimited forgiveness of all our sin and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This water flowing from Jesus is the water of eternal life by which anyone who drinks of it will live forever.

Jesus speaks of this living water in our Gospel reading for today. He says to the Samaritan woman at the well, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:13-14)

The water that flowed from the rock at Horeb was a good thing, but its usefulness was limited. The Israelites who drank from that would be renewed, reinvigorated, and restored to health. However, they would eventually be thirsty again. And, as clear and clean and good as that water was, it could not prevent those who drank from it from dying.

So it is with the "water" of this world – all of the things for which we thirst here and now. We thirst for the needs of this life: food, drink, shelter, and money to provide for these things. We thirst for the pleasures of this life: sports, electronic toys, creature comforts, and so on. These things are not necessarily sinful or bad. However, the things of this world cannot satisfy our deep spiritual thirst. At best, the things of this world can satisfy us only temporarily. We will always be thirsty again. Often, we try to satisfy or mask our spiritual thirst by obtaining more and more of the things of this world. But that's like being adrift at sea and trying to quench your thirst with sea water. Not only will you not satisfy your thirst, you will just get more and thirstier.

Beyond the needs and greeds of this life, we thirst for something deeper and more profound: peace where there is guilt; purpose in life where there is only a chaotic existence; and life – true and lasting life – as we live in a world where death surrounds us and seems to have the final word. The

water Jesus gives – forgiveness, new life now, and everlasting life into eternity – which He has earned for us by His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead – will satisfy us and meet all these needs completely and always.

So drink regularly and eagerly the water flowing from the Rock, Jesus Christ. It flows freely to you in His Word and through His Sacraments. You will always find peace from sins forgiven, no matter how many or how serious they might be. You will always find purpose and joy in the new baptismal life you live now, no matter how confusing your life seems to be. You will always have the hope and guarantee of an eternal life as God designed it to be in the Garden of Eden no matter how much evil surrounds you and death stalks you in this life. Drink from this water and you will never be thirsty again.

Our opening hymn for today captures these thoughts well. Let's hear them again.

*Come to Calv'ry's holy mountain,
Sinners, ruined by the fall;
Here a pure and healing fountain
Flows for you, for me, for all,
In a full, perpetual tide,
Opened when our Savior died.*

*Come in poverty and meanness,
Come defiled, without, within;
From infection and uncleanness,
From the leprosy of sin,
Wash your robes and make them white;
Ye shall walk with God in light.*

*Come in sorrow and contrition,
Wounded, impotent, and blind;
Here the guilty, free remission,
Here the troubled, peace may find.
Health this fountain will restore;
They that drink shall thirst no more.*

*They that drink shall live forever;
'Tis a soul-renewing flood.
God is faithful; God will never
Break His covenant of blood,
Signed when our Redeemer died,
Sealed when He was glorified.*

Amen