

Rev. Adrienne Meier

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*This sermon is second in a series of four delivered to complement St. Thomas's Vacation Bible School program, **Rivers of Life.***

The Proof We Need

Exodus 17:1-7

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?"

It is all a bit...melodramatic. I mean, I guess, Moses hitting the rock and enough water gushing forth to quench the thirst of a nation, is pretty dramatic, but all the *words* around it are just a bit over the top for me. God is leading the people in stages, they camp here and there at the Lord's direction. But here, at Rephidim, there isn't enough water, and the people are panicking. And rightfully so. They are a complete *nation*: they have children with them, and frail people, and livestock that are making the journey possible. Without water they will not live long. That is simple fact. But when they point out the trouble to Moses, he gets irritated. And, by the end, *he* calls the place Massah and Meribah, Test and Quarrel. But, if the people are quarrelsome, I feel like it is totally justified. I'm not my best self when it is hot and my water bottle is empty. What is Moses expecting? What is God expecting? Why are the people expected to be the ones on their best behavior? They've been walking in the *wilderness*, for days or weeks, for Pete's sake. If the question is true, who can blame them when they ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" It is a test of God's presence. And the real proof of the Lord's presence isn't in being spared thirst, but in having their thirst quenched.

Honestly, I think the Israelites get a bad rap. The text talks endlessly about the whining, about how they forget the goodness of the Lord. True, the giving of the water comes literally on the heels of the giving of manna and quail. They probably could have thought about how God provided for them just a few verses ago, but that doesn't really seem fair.

Being without water in the desert is traumatic - it is a life-threatening event, and when your life is threatened, it isn't your "let's stop and think about it" brain that reacts. People who study trauma note five common responses to trauma: we fight, we flee, we freeze, we flop, or we fawn. Most of are familiar with the first three - fight, flee, or freeze; to flop is like when a computer experiences system overload and just shuts down. And fawning is a response to trauma where we try to get closer to our aggressor in an attempt to bring the traumatic event to an end. Throughout the story of the Exodus, you see the Israelites responding to their circumstances in these ways. It turns out that completely changing your life is not without its trauma. It turns out that wandering in a wilderness is not without its trauma. It turns out living through a global pandemic is not without its trauma. Really, it turns out that life is not without trauma. We will all be impacted by circumstances beyond our control.

I'm interested the the key question of this text, "Is the Lord among us or not?" doesn't come during the complaining and quarreling, but at the very end of the story. It comes as the Israelites work to make sense of what has just happened. They wonder, if we experience, thirst, or hunger—as they did before the gift of the manna and quail—if we experience the confusion and loneliness of the wilderness, if we die out here (and they will, all of them, die out there. It will be the next generation that makes it to the Promised Land), if we suffer in this way, is it evidence of God's absence?

And, like, I get this in my *bones*. I remember long, sleepless nights, tossing and turning in pain of the body or pain of the soul, and praying to God for relief. And with every prayer that I uttered, wondering if God even heard, wondering if God even cared? Often, the traumatic events of my life, few that they are, I've experienced as radio silence. Most of the time I'm so focused on solving the problem that I do not even pray. And soon, that turns into I cannot pray, and then, fortunately, around the time I became aware of my inability to pray, my silence blossoms into speech - sometimes pleas, even threats, but every last prayer comes with thanksgiving that I am, at last, talking to God. And this seems to be the doorstep of healing for me, though healing may still be a long way off. What the Bible returns to again and again is that pain is not evidence of the absence of God, but healing is proof of the presence of God.

In today's story, water isn't the only gift of God, so, too, is the wilderness. Many of the world's religions teach us that pain is part of life. For Christians, the heart of making sense of pain and trauma is finding God in it. I don't mean that it is God's plan per se - I'll let you work with that theological hot potato on your own, if you want. Making sense of pain and trauma is like what Fr. Richard Rohr, a Jesuit priest who runs the Center of Action and Contemplation, says, "If only we could see [our] 'wounds' as *the way through* as Jesus did, then they would become sacred wounds rather than scars to deny, disguise, and project onto others." What the Israelites can draw from their parchedness could be their own transformation at the hands of a benevolent God. What we can draw out of our own thirst for safety and security, our own hunger for justice and righteousness, our own desire for wholeness...what we, too, can draw out is our own transformation at the hands of a

benevolent God. As it turns out, all of the journey—not just the “let my people go” part, but all of the wilderness—exists to transform the Israelites into a fully liberated people. Perhaps this is true of our own lives as well. The wilderness is a gift as much as the water

Here’s my point, Beloved. When COVID descended, we wondered how we might make sense of our two or so weeks apart, but then the time stretched on and on, and even as we are ascending from this deep well, it may be easy to fall into some trap of believing that only way to prove we lived through this time is to emerge “better.” I remember wanting this to be a magical time for my kids, and I can assure you it was not. It was more a time of yelling and idle threats followed by lots of screen time. Certainly not “better” over here. But “better” is not a good post-pandemic goal. Healing is. That will be the proof that the Lord is with us - not if we match someone else’s definition of better. Not if we developed healthier habits, or made beautiful art, or succeeded at our job despite great adversity. Better will not be the proof, healing will be. It is possible that through this wilderness other traumas may, too, be healed - the meaning we make collectively may help us as individuals. Richard Rohr says, “We all must carry the cross of our own reality until God transforms us through it. These are the wounded healers of the world, and healers who have fully faced their wounds are the only ones who heal anyone else.” And always, always, the wounds won’t be the evidence of God’s absence; but when we are healed, we will be the proof we need that the Lord is among us.

Amen.