

“Is the Lord Among Us or Not?”

October 1, 2017

Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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.

²The 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?”

³But 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?”

⁴So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

⁵The 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.

⁶I 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.

⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

ANGER IN THE DESERT

Take away the bare necessities of life, and people get angry.

Not long ago I attended a meeting of folks who had been flooded out of their apartments.

Normally genteel and polite people got to be quite boisterous.

These folks didn't have a place to live.

Many of their possessions had been destroyed.

And the leaders of their community had no certain answers about the future.

Don't identify yourself as a leader when the people are in a situation such as this.

They take no prisoners!

We've seen it before.

When disaster strikes

... when the well runs dry and the electricity doesn't work

...people want answers ... and they want help...NOW!

And not only do people blame their leaders when disaster strikes.

They also blame God.

I was talking about all the natural disasters with the lady that cuts my hair.

Hurricanes devastating the Caribbean, flooding in Houston, Irma covering the state of Florida, earthquakes in Mexico.

We talked about it all.

What else do you do when you're getting your hair cut but talk about the weather?

Anyway, her response to all these natural disasters was classic.

She said, "It makes you wonder.

What did we do to get God so mad?"

When the storm comes...when the ground shakes

....when the water runs out

...sometimes people not only get mad at their leaders...

They also ask,

“What did we do to get God so mad?
Where is God when you need Him?”

MOSES AND THE ISRAELITES IN THE DESERT

That same question is asked in our lesson for today.
I've used it as the title of my sermon.

People who lack the bare necessities in the desert ask,

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

They named the place where this happened Massah and Meribah to memorialize their complaints. This was the place of testing and quarreling.

This was the place where the people not only wanted to put Moses on trial ... this was the place where they wanted to put God on trial as well.

In this desert they asked:

Does anyone care that we have no place to stay?
Does anyone care that we have no food or water?
Where is the Lord in all this?

This was not the first time the Israelites had faced a crisis in the desert.

RED SEA

Soon after God's people were delivered from slavery in Egypt they found themselves trapped.

On one side was the Red Sea.
And on other was side was the Egyptian army.

What did they do in this moment of crisis?

They blamed Moses.

They said, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?"

...It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness,"

(Exodus 14:11-12).

Most of you know the rest of the story.

The Lord opened up the waters of the Red Sea, and the people walked to safety on dry ground.

And when the Egyptian army pursued they were engulfed by the water. The Lord saved his people from what looked like certain disaster.

BITTER WATER

But, before long there was another crisis in the desert.

The only water the people could find to drink was contaminated.

They complained to Moses asking,

“So what are we supposed to drink?”

Once again God gave his people what they needed.

The Lord instructed Moses to place a piece of wood in the bitter water.

And the bitter water became “sweet” ... fit to drink.

HUNGER

But, the disasters just kept coming.

A few weeks later they were out of food.

And the hungry people said to Moses,

"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; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:3).

Once again, they blamed Moses, and they blamed God.

“Moses, if you and the Lord wanted to kill us, why didn’t you just do it in Egypt.

At least we could have some food to eat up until the time of our death.”

But, God didn’t judge the people for their lack of faith.

Instead, God had compassion on them.

The Lord provided manna for the people...bread from heaven.

And that bread kept coming all the days the people lived in the wilderness.

NO WATER

That brings us to our lesson for today.

Once again the people do not have something that is necessary for life.

Moses, following the leading of the Lord guides them through the wilderness.

But, the place where they set up camp has no water.

Again they blame their predicament on Moses.

They said,

“Give us water to drink!

What kind of leader are you?

Why have you led us to this godforsaken place?”

Actually the word Moses uses to describe their discontent goes beyond complaining.

That word translated “quarrel” refers to legal action.

So, in other words, the people were so fed up with Moses

...they were read to call in Morgan and Morgan

...and bring a class action suit against him!

But, Moses said,

“Your quarrel is not just with me.

It’s with the Lord.

Do you really think that you can win a lawsuit against the Lord?”

But, when people are thirsty, they are not persuaded by reason.

They blamed Moses, and their quarrel with him sounded familiar.

“Why did you bring us out of Egypt?

Did you want to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

WATER FROM A ROCK

Apparently they also threatened to do Moses bodily harm.
Moses told the Lord,
“Lord you’ve got to help me! These people are ready to stone me!”

But, once again the Lord had a plan for the salvation of His people.
God told Moses,

“Go ahead of the people,
Take some of the elders of Israel with you;
take the staff with which you struck the Nile.

Don’t waste time.
Go right now.

And know this:
I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb.

Strike this rock.
And water will come out of it.
This is how I will give my people something to drink.”

Moses didn’t see the Lord standing there at the rock.
But, he knew he was there because when he struck that dry rock the water
began to run like it was faucet.

Once again God had saved his people in the desert.

GOING AHEAD OF THE PEOPLE

When people lose hope in the wilderness,
faith leaders are called to go on ahead of the people
and find the solution that God provides.

I think this is important.

Sometimes we become so bogged down with our immediate needs
... that we lose hope.

We ask out of fear and anger,
“Is the Lord among us or not?”

In the desert, in that lonely place
in that place where needs are great and the supply is short,

... we too might be tempted to wonder if God is really with us ... or not.

But, could it be that the Lord is right in front of us?
Could it be that the dry rock in the desert is really the rock of our salvation?

Some of us have learned through experience that
...when we go with God into the dry places,
life giving water can still be found.

FAITH VERSUS FEAR

But, like the Israelites, when the next crisis comes we still we struggle to believe.

We have trouble trusting in the rock of our salvation.

The Israelites found water in a dry rock in the middle of the desert.

But, this miracle was not enough to bolster their faith.

Remember the names they gave this place.
They called it Massah and Meribah, the place of testing and quarreling.

This place was not remembered for salvation.
This place was not remembered as the place where the people were saved from their life threatening thirst.

This was the place where their faith was tested.
This was the place where they asked,

“Where’s God when you really need Him?”

Apparently God’s people needed something more than just a drink of water in order to have faith in the promises of God.

They needed the presence of God.
They needed to know that God was with them.

And so their journey in the desert continued for many years before they were ready to enter the Promised Land.

And when God's people looked back on that wilderness experience, they saw it as a golden age.

They realized that God was closer to them in the wilderness than He ever had been before or since.

WHAT ARE WE THIRSTY FOR?

I wonder.
What are we thirsty for?
What do we desire more than anything else?

Some of us desire some material possession ... a new car or a new home perhaps.

Maybe we thirst for someone to love.

All addictive behavior ... alcoholism, drug addiction ... and so forth, has at its heart this need.

We have this thirst ... this desire that we can't seem to satisfy.

Like the Israelites we too need more than a drink of water.

We need more than food.

We need living water.
We need bread from heaven.

We need to know that God is with us.

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

There's a story in the New Testament about this thirst for the presence of God.

There was a woman, a Samaritan woman who was thirsty.

And so in the middle of the day in the hot sun she came to the well.

This was no ordinary well.

It was Jacob's well ... dug by the Patriarch of the faith many years ago.

It was a well that reminded the people of God's promises.

It was a physical connection with the mighty acts of God in the past.

After all these years the people still were able to satisfy their thirst at Jacob's well.

Usually the well was deserted when the sun was high and hot.

But, on this day someone else was there ... a Jewish man.

And this Jewish man asked the Samaritan woman for a drink of water.

Jews and Samaritans were not on speaking terms in those days, and so the woman said to this Jewish man:

"You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan.
How can you ask me for a drink?"

And this Jewish man said to her,

"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink,
you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman had no idea what this crazy Jewish guy was talking about.

"What's so bad about the water we have here.
If it was good enough for Jacob, it's good enough for me."

The Samaritan woman tried to rid herself of this pesky man who wanted a drink.

... but to know avail.

This man knew who she was and how she had failed in life. (She was... like many people today... “looking for love in all the wrong places”.)

And no matter how many times she came to the well, and no matter how many love affairs she had ... her thirst was not quenched.

She was not satisfied.

Then this strange Jewish man said,

“What you really need is God’s presence.
You’re in luck.

I’m the Messiah.

I am the source of living water.
I am the salvation that God’s people have been seeking all these years.”

The Jewish man’s name, of course, was Jesus.

The Samaritan woman was convinced by what he had to say.
She invited the whole town to come and listen to this prophet.

They did, and they too were convinced.

They said,
“We have heard for ourselves,
and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” (John 4:42)

TASTE AND SEE

The Scripture we used for our call to worship put it this way,

“Taste and see that the Lord is good ...” (Psalm 34:8)

In other words seek God’s presence,
and you’ll receive the one thing that you really need.
You’ll know from first hand experience that it’s true.

The Lord is with you.

This past week we have seen the desperation of the people in Puerto Rico.

They stand in lines for hours to receive a few bottles of water and a few snacks.

In one case they were told that this meager ration would have to satisfy them for several days.

There's an urgent need for food and water.
These people are literally in the desert.

(By the way, once again I would say that the Presbyterian Church has on the ground connections with churches in Puerto Rico. Your donations to the Presbyterian Disaster Fund will give you more bang for the buck. The money will bring real service to the people.)

But, I think the people of Puerto Rico need more than money.

They need us.
They need our support.
They need to know that we are with them and for them.

What was it Jesus said?
Something about the reward of giving a cup of cold water to the little ones... those who are in need. (Matthew 10:42; Mark 9:41)

In this way we not only connect with each other.
We also connect with the Lord.

The human and the Divine meet when water flows from the dry rock.

Today World Communion Sunday takes on a special meaning.

We take the elements that represent the sacrifice of God for the world.
Body broken. Blood shed.

But, the story does not end there.
The body broken becomes the bread of heaven.

And the blood shed becomes the living water that satisfies our deepest need.

Today many people find themselves in the desert.
They cry for help.

The need is so great that we are tempted to give up.
They call it compassion fatigue.

But, then we remember.
We are connected to salvation that will not be defeated by the troubles of the world.

God's people ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

And the answer comes back loud and clear.
The Lord is with us.
And the Lord is for us.

How does the old gospel hymn put it?
"Rock of ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee."

Let us travel to the rock of our salvation.
Let us drink from the fountain of eternal life.
And let us tell others about the source of living water.

Amen.