

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7

Directed by God, the whole company of Israel moved on by stages from the Wilderness of Sin. They set camp at Rephidim. And there wasn't a drop of water for the people to drink. The people took Moses to task: "Give us water to drink." But Moses said, "Why pester me? Why are you testing God?"

But the people were thirsty for water there. They complained to Moses, "Why did you take us from Egypt and drag us out here with our children and animals to die of thirst?"

Moses cried out in prayer to God, "What can I do with these people? Any minute now they'll kill me!"

God said to Moses, "Go on out ahead of the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel. Take the staff you used to strike the Nile. And go. I'm going to be present before you there on the rock at Horeb. You are to strike the rock. Water will gush out of it and the people will drink."

Moses did what he said, with the elders of Israel right there watching. He named the place Massah (Testing-Place) and Meribah (Quarreling) because of the quarreling of the Israelites and because of their testing of God when they said, "Is God here with us, or not?"

One of Erma Bombeck's favorite Jewish grandmother stories: The grandmother "took her grandson to the beach one day, complete with bucket, shovel and sun hat. The grandmother dozed off and as she slept, a large wave dragged the child out to sea. The grandmother awoke and was devastated. She fell to the ground on her knees and prayed, 'God, if you save my grandchild, I promise I'll make it up to you. I'll join whatever club you want me to. I'll volunteer at the hospital, give to the poor and do anything that makes you happy.'

"Suddenly, a huge wave tossed her grandson on the beach at her feet. She noticed color in his cheeks and his eyes were bright. He was alive. As she stood up, however, she seemed to be upset. She put her hands on her hips, looked skyward, and said sharply, 'He had a hat, you know.'"

Isn't that how it goes with some people? They never seem satisfied. They're always complaining. Take the Israelites in today's story. Free at last! The Israelites were free from their slavery to the Egyptians. The great leader called by God, Moses, went to the unnamed Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go!" When Pharaoh did not cooperate, God sent some rather unpleasant plagues.

God turned the water into blood. He tormented the people with an over-abundance of frogs, then gnats and lice, then flies. He gave the livestock a horrible disease. Then the people and beasts were burdened with painful boils. God sent hail as never seen before to cover and destroy the land. Then as if that was not enough, God sent locusts to cover the earth and ate every plant remaining after the hailstorm. When Pharaoh still refused to let the Israelites go free, God sent the ninth plague—darkness over Egypt for three days. It was so dark that the people could not see one another. The tenth plague God sent was death—death to every firstborn child, including Pharaoh's first-born son. Finally, Pharaoh sent the Israelites away.

And finally, under Moses' leadership, the Israelites were free, and into the wilderness they went. Moses trusted God's guidance to lead his people to the Promised Land. It would be a forty-year grueling journey. Prior to the text I read today, the people needed food. They complained to Moses and God came through with the provision of manna—fresh manna every day so they would have enough food.

In today's story of their journey, we read that they could not find enough water to drink. They feared for their lives and so they turned to Moses and once again, they complained, "Moses, did you bring us out here to die a slow painful death from thirst?"

By now, Moses was getting tired of their complaining. We read that he even feared for his life. I have to wonder if Moses wasn't feeling a bit frustrated with God himself. He didn't want this assignment in the first place. Couldn't God make things on the journey flow more smoothly? Putting that aside, Moses went to God on behalf of the people to ask for help. And of course, God came through with a solution.

When I read stories like this in the bible, I find I can be very quick to criticize the Israelites. But if the truth be told, I have to admit that we are no different today. When things don't go our way, we are quick to complain. When life gets tough, we have our doubts about God, and we look for other solutions to our problems.

The Israelites obviously were forgetful about all God did for them in the past. Remember, they were slaves in Egypt. It was a rough and unhappy life they had there, and God got them their freedom. They witnessed God's power when he sent the plagues on the Egyptians to get their freedom. They experienced God's protection during the plagues.

And when they needed food while they journeyed, God provided them with a fresh daily supply of manna. Did they forget about all of this when they threatened Moses' life and started to complain about the water shortage? God revealed His mighty power to provide for them in the past; surely God would provide this time. Again, it's so easy to point fingers at their oversights; yet, when life gets hard for us, do we always remember God's faithfulness to us? Do we complain, or do we ask for God's help?

Indeed, when we have struggles, God wants us to come to him for help. But there is a difference between complaining and asking God for help. When we complain, our motivation is to be heard so we can acquire pity for what is distressing us. Yes, we seek a resolution to our problems, but we want more than that—we want inner satisfaction, recognition that we have a right to be upset about something. And sometimes, our complaining is used to blame our problems on someone else, even though we may have brought the problem on ourselves in the first place.

When we take our need to God in prayer with a motivation of trust, we are acknowledging that we are dependent on God and we know that God can help us. Our prayers are a sign that we recognize God's greatness and power and that all things are possible for those who put their trust in God.

So, we discover in this story that the Israelites complained when they were in need. We also learn from what Moses named the place where this episode occurred that the people's expression of displeasure was also an attempt to test God. When they asked Moses, "Is God here with us, or not?" they really were saying something like, "If God is with us, then why are we without water? Let God prove to us that he is with us by giving us water."

John Wayne Brown, Jr. was a snake handling evangelist. He was bitten one day by one of his own timber rattlesnakes in the middle of his sermon. Though Brown continued to speak to the people of Rock House Holiness Church that October night in 1998, he soon collapsed. The congregation gathered around him praying and trying to cool him with an electric fan, but Brown was dead within minutes.

Brown, 34, had handled snakes since he was 17 and had survived 22 previous bites. He left behind five orphaned children. His wife Melinda had died from a snake bite during a revival service three years earlier.

One pastor who was onstage with Brown the night of his death said he didn't think the tragedy would make the church change its practices: "I think they will be more careful about handling serpents," he said. "I think they will wait until the Lord moves on them."

"A lot of people don't understand us," he offered. "We are just normal people, but we believe in God's Word."

Really? If they believe in God's Word, why do they feel the need to test God's power and protection by handling these dangerous snakes?

In today's scripture, the Israelites dared God to do something to help them. They threatened to return to Egypt, saying they were better off in Egypt. Like spoiled children, they threatened to abandon God and God's plan unless they got what they wanted.

Imagine God's exasperation with the people. In Psalm 95, the writer captures God's frustration from this time. Listen as I read it to you:

PSALM 95

*Come, let's shout praises to God,
raise the roof for the Rock who saved us!
Let's march into his presence singing praises,
lifting the rafters with our hymns!
And why? Because God is the best,
High King over all the gods.
In one hand he holds deep caves and caverns,
in the other hand grasps the high mountains.
He made Ocean—he owns it!
His hands sculpted Earth!
So come, let us worship: bow before him,
on your knees before God, who made us!
Oh yes, he's our God,
and we're the people he pastures, the flock he feeds.
Drop everything and listen, listen as he speaks:
"Don't turn a deaf ear as in the Bitter Uprising,
As on the day of the Wilderness Test,
when your ancestors turned and put me to the test.
For forty years they watched me at work among them,
as over and over they tried my patience.
And I was provoked—oh, was I provoked!
'Can't they keep their minds on God for five minutes?
Do they simply refuse to walk down my road?'
Exasperated, I exploded,
'They'll never get where they're headed,
never be able to sit down and rest.'"*

Did you notice the Psalmist began by telling his listeners to praise God and to stay focused on God. Then in the second half of the Psalm he reminds them of this part of their history that we've been thinking about and he challenges his listeners to resist the childlike behavior of their ancestors when times get tough. Instead, remember who God is, his power, his glory, remember his promises to you, to be faithful to you, remember and praise God instead of testing God and throwing a temper tantrum.

March 15, 2020 - "Challenging and Testing God"

So far, we've been able to identify two reactions of the Israelites to the drought—complaining and testing God. But is there something more going on here? Indeed, there is. The bigger problem for the Israelites was the drought they were experiencing in their souls. The complaining and testing were symptoms of their spiritual drought. They had forgotten God. Their focus was on themselves and their physical thirst, not on God's power and not on God's previous care for them.

God did come through for them this time again. He provided life-saving water. He commanded Moses to hit a rock with his staff; and when he did, water flowed from it. God saved his people even though they really did not deserve it. The drought was over; their thirst was quenched.

The good news for us is that God provides living waters for us if we experience spiritual droughts. Jesus Christ is our rock. From him flows thirst-quenching, living water. It washes away our complaints. It cleanses the feeling to test God, demanding that God prove that He is with us. Following Jesus, living and loving as Jesus loved us, keeps us focused on God. Then, no storm can shake our inmost calm. Jesus is the rock that quenches our thirst. Amen.