

“Where In the World is Nachshon When You Need Him?”

Exodus 17:1-7

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So, here we are halfway through Lent. Are you suffering yet? Have you been tested by your fast? Are you becoming quarrelsome with your family due to the deprivation of chocolate or coffee, like the Israelites and their water? And imagine, Lent is only forty days, not forty years. Although both the season of Lent, and its length, traditionally correspond to Jesus’ time fasting and being tempted in the desert, in many ways, a better parallel for us might be Israel’s time in the desert, and the spiritual challenges it faced once freed from slavery, but not yet delivered to the promised land. Those forty years constituted a period of maturation, a growing up and a growing into an identity as God’s people, a coming together of the intellectual and the emotional parts of faith in God. And that sounds a lot to me like the purpose of this season we call Lent.

Our verses tonight from Exodus offer a great lesson about God’s provision for a desperate people, and I hope that you have experienced that provision this Lent when you have needed it, that water has flowed from a stone for you in the desert of your spiritual disciplines. In planning for these forty days, I thought a reminder halfway through that God does take care of us might be a relief for some in their journey this year. Indeed, a little later tonight, we are going to remember other such instances about how God has answered our prayers of need, sustaining

us on our journeys with just what we needed at just the right time. But I want also tonight to put this little story back into the bigger picture, and see what larger lessons can be learned from that place Moses called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

I learned a lot of interesting stuff preparing for tonight, and I want to share three things that I hope will give you some strength, but before I share those three things, let’s review just a bit our story. If this story of water from the rock sounds familiar, it may be because a variation of it appears in several places in the Old Testament, and because it is not the first occasion of the Israelites grumbling about their food and water supply. In fact, this is the third time since the very recent escape from Egypt that the people complain to Moses, first about the bitter water they encounter at Marah, then about the lack of bread and meat in the wilderness of Sin, and now once again at Rephidim. And all three times, God provides what is needed – bitter water made sweet by a tree branch thrown in it, manna and quail covering the ground morning and evening, and then water pouring from the rock struck by the staff. Each time the cry goes up, the blessings come down, even if poor Moses doesn’t like to hear their grumbling. And that leads me to the first thing I want to share with you tonight, that although Moses gets his nose out of joint quite a bit when the people remind him that they are starving and dying of thirst, God not once displays anger at this “testing” of God, as Moses calls it. Only Moses does. There are places in Scripture where God takes issue with complaining

Israelites, but these three stories are not among them, and maybe that is because God knows it has been only a very short while since they left the relative food security of their slavery in Egypt, and that they have a steep learning curve about trusting God. You may remember that the Israelites had been in captivity in Egypt for more than four hundred years, but had been in the desert just a matter of days or weeks, and so they have a lot of learning to do about the God who seemed to be absent for four centuries, only to show up and rescue them and demand that they be faithful. I don't think you can really blame them for asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?" But it is Moses, not God, who seems to be bothered by that question, and you can't really blame him either since he's the man in the middle, catching all the heat, perhaps fearful that if his people don't look faithful or grateful enough before God, that all his hard work will go in vain. Yes, it is Moses who describes the Israelites' grumbling as "testing" the Lord, but it is God who provides, in all three stories, without affirming that characterization, but rather only with what they need.

What I would like to suggest to you from all this is that despite our reluctance to seem ungrateful to God for what we already have, I think God can be trusted to receive our complaints about what we really need without striking us down with fire from the sky. The people weren't asking for chocolate éclairs out there, they were asking for what they needed to survive, the essentials of food and water for them and their children. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if we have a little

Moses on our shoulders who prevents us from sharing our needs with others or even God, for that fear of having our faith questioned, and our legitimate needs labeled as grumbling or complaining. And that little Moses is whispering, “Can’t you just be happy with what you already have? What kind of an ingrate are you?” while our souls are dying to cry out to God or another living soul our deepest needs for companionship or mercy or justice. And to that I say, let Moses be worried about himself, let others worry about themselves, that our God is big enough to take whatever grumbling we can dish out, and to give us without grudging what we need. I can’t say that applies to the new Mercedes Benz you want, but when it comes to what really matters in our lives that corresponds with the abundant life God has promised us in Jesus Christ, you can take that as the Gospel.

The second and third things I learned I learned from taking a look at how tonight’s story from Exodus was interpreted by our Jewish brothers and sisters, and as always, their perspective is distinct from ours, yet refreshing. Christians tend to read very short passages of Scripture every Sunday, something bite-sized you can swallow and digest before going out to the Sunday brunch buffet after church. Even in churches with a tradition of hour-long sermons, the Bible passages are generally very short, and the teaching in depth. Now, maybe it is because Jews hold services on Saturday night when there is no brunch awaiting them, but when they read Scripture, they read Scripture, lots of Scripture! So, for example, the mere seven verses we read tonight from Exodus 17 are part of the Torah reading

that includes all of chapters thirteen through seventeen, which is to say that they hear the story we heard tonight as part of a longer narrative, a building up of the story not unlike I did when I shared about the other three occasions of God providing for the people's needs in the desert. But more than that, what it is interesting is where the Jewish tradition breaks up these very much longer passages, and what gets included with what, and how all that gets interpreted together. And so, for example, tonight's passage from Exodus is very near the end of a longer Torah reading, but it is intimately connected with both the story that follows it, and the stories that precede it, and it is something about these I would like to share.

If you are wondering why Moses should be angry with his countrymen's complaining about the lack of water, you are not the only one. It seems like a reasonable request. But maybe that is because you have never heard of Moses' old buddy Nachshon, son of Aminidab, a real go-getter, a man with the power to really get the water flowing. If Moses is frustrated by the Israelites' complaining, maybe it is because Nachshon, son of Aminidab, was nowhere to be found. You see, according to Rabbinic legend, not in the Bible per se, mind you, but according to Rabbinic legend which was taken very seriously, as the Hebrews stood on the banks of the Red Sea escaping from Pharaoh, the waters would not part, and they began to be more and more worried about the Egyptian army advancing on them from the rear. One group wanted to fight the Egyptians, another wanted to go back

to Egypt and continue being slaves. A third group thought they should just pray to God and a fourth thought there was no other option but to throw themselves into the Sea and commit suicide. None of these, of course, were very good responses to the crisis at hand, not even praying, because God had told Moses, “Just go straight ahead. Don’t worry, there will be a miracle and the sea will split.” So then it was a question of who would make the first move into the sea. Finally, a certain Nachshon, son of Aminidab, strode forth and entered the waters, not waiting for them to part. And he kept going even when the waters reached his knees, then his waist, then his chest, and finally his mouth. But when the waters reached his nostrils, they began to recede and the people could all pass through safely. It took one man’s faith in God’s promises to open the way for everyone else.

Now, you may be remembering the story being told a little differently, with Moses raising his staff, and the waters parting, but that wasn’t the first thing God asked of the people. You see, *first* God said, “Tell the Israelites to move forward” but they didn’t, not until Nachshon. According to one contemporary Rabbi, interpreting the legend of Nachshon, “When our ancestors approached the waters with implicit faith in God, the waters saw in them a measure of the divine. Because the created being cannot controvert its creator, the water instinctively and spontaneously receded before the personification of the divine,” and that personification of the divine was Nachshon, son of Aminidab. Yes, the staff of Moses is important, but important too is the faith of the people to go forward when

God tells them too, even without the security of the staff. And so in this legend, the staff becomes a sign of the parting of the waters, rather than the means of the parting the waters, because the faith of Israel is what must always go forward under the promises of God, even without the staff of Moses. Now, you don't have to believe this legend, but you might want to pay attention to it, because there is something important in it, namely that God's promises for us compel us to move forward in faith even when circumstances suggest we should not, or when we become paralyzed by our fears, or when the odds seem overwhelming. If Moses is frustrated by the complaints for water, maybe it was because nobody went looking for it, that they had forgotten Nachshon's can-do faith so soon. You see, the water in that region of the Sinai Peninsula is just below the surface of its limestone, and sometimes you just have to poke around until you find it, but instead of everyone going out there with their own staffs poking around until they found it, they were waiting for Moses to do it. They gave up too easily when taking matters into their own hands would have made all the difference. The challenges we face need to see in us that "measure of the divine" the waters saw in Nachshon as he waded in, faithful to God's promise. It's all well and good knowing God will answer your prayers even if you complain, but will you wade in?

The story of the parting of the waters begins this long Torah reading in Jewish worship, but the story at the end also relates to our story tonight. What follows immediately is the report of the first attack suffered by Israel by one of its

enemies, the Amalekites, and in the rabbinical mind, there's a link. It so happens that the word "Amalek in Hebrew numerology is two hundred and forty, which equals the numerical value of *sofek*, meaning doubt," and doubt is just what the Israelites displayed by complaining to Moses rather than trusting in God and looking for water. And just as Nachshon, son of Aminidab, was for them a personification of the divine, Amalek became a personification of evil, and doubt. In Deuteronomy, the Jews are told to never forget this attack by the Amalekites as they were fleeing Egypt, "because Amalek did not fear God," because the Israelites were on their way to no longer fearing God. And so Amalek has become in Judaism something in the spiritual life to be destroyed because Amalek does not allow the knowledge of God to be translated into deed. Amalek casts doubts about the idea of Godliness permeating this physical world. Amalek represents the refusal to allow Godliness to penetrate into the world, the doubts and uncertainties which prevent a Jew from coming closer to God. And so there is a perpetual battle against the Amalekites, even to this day, to not give into our doubts and uncertainties.

So what's the deal with dragging up all of these old Jewish stories and legends? Just this: that failing to remember both what God has done, and how we have or have not responded to God's promises has its consequences. Our failure to remember doesn't make God less faithful to us, but it does make us less faithful to God, and robs us of the opportunities to demonstrate to the world, to the waters of

the Red Sea, to the Amalekites, to our friends and families, our co-workers and our enemies that our God is faithful and generous, that our God ungrudgingly gives when we are in need, even when we complain. This Lent, we are raising our Ebenezer together, and just what is that? A collective remembrance of all God has done for us, a marker of our history for those who follow behind us. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go on ahead of the people, and 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.’” Tonight, I invite you to continue your remembering this Lent by remembering when God has poured out living water for you, as God did in that other desert so many years ago. Amen.