

Strike the Rock
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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?'

Exodus 17: 1-7

I love scripture. I am so grateful to those who wrote it and revised it and preserved it, that we have this record that is not cleaned up. In almost all literature that is this ancient, the heroes are god-like or even gods. But Moses is a very reluctant hero and altogether human. In him and in the Hebrews, we can see our own imperfect selves. Because we see their failings we can learn from what they lived through.

When I looked deeply at this text three weeks ago, it was just after Hurricane Katrina. You know how it is when you turn to a scripture you know well, every time you read it, it's new. You see in it things you never saw before. There's a whole lot of testing, and testiness, going on here!

The first thing I noticed on this reading was how defensive Moses is. Picture the situation: It's easier to see it in our mind's eye since the two recent hurricanes. The Hebrews have wandered from place to place for six weeks since leaving Egypt, sometimes stopping for a week or more, but mostly on the move. They were poor to start with, slaves. They had left with so little warning they couldn't even let the bread rise.

They had to quickly pack up what they could carry, mostly on foot, and move out with their animals and their elderly, their sick and their children, pregnant women and nursing mothers. Talk about evacuees! Imagine what we've just seen in the last few weeks, but with none of the supports and conveniences we have been able to muster, inadequate though they've been.

Like the poor evacuees from New Orleans, the Hebrews have had to move again and again, each time facing danger or deprivation, and they have no idea when the problems will end, but certainly no time soon. They are hot, and thirsty and worried and weary. And who wouldn't be? The commentators are awfully hard on the Hebrews, but they have my sympathy, these poor bedraggled people who have moved from one camping place to another. Now they get to yet another stopping place, and there's no water--- again.

So they say to Moses, "Give us water to drink." The text says, "They quarreled with Moses," but all we see is a request. There was no water and they asked Moses for it. It's Moses who is quarrelsome in his response. Moses' first reaction is not sympathy, it's not action, it's not concern, it's not encouragement, it's not prayer, it's not penitence: there is no water; and Moses is offended that they ask!

They say "Give us water to drink," and he says, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' He immediately construes their request, or maybe it's a demand, as criticism of him; and he equates criticism of him with criticism of God. I have to say, when I read it; I let out a kind of snort of surprised recognition! We've seen a lot of that lately: leaders who think that to question them is a sign of lack of faith, or a failure of patriotism; who see need as faintheartedness; who are quicker to criticize the desperate than to help them; leaders who blame the victims. Moses here is the president and the head of FEMA and the governor of Louisiana all rolled in to one: poor Moses! There is no system for meeting the needs of the people. In fact—they can't be met. It's humanly impossible.

No doubt Moses' reaction is defensive, in part, because he's been thinking the same thing: "There's no water here!" He's probably been worrying for days as their supply has dwindled, hoping to find water, afraid of what will happen if they don't.

He has never been a comfortable and confident leader: after God tells him to go to Egypt, the first words out of Moses' mouth are "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me." He didn't want to do this. He tried to tell God he wasn't the right choice. God would have none of it. Moses is in a hard place. What he has been asked to do is very difficult, and problems keep coming up.

Much of what he reads into this confrontation with the people is probably already a conflict in his own heart. When Moses first goes back to Egypt with Aaron, the elders of the people hear from Aaron what God has said, and the people see signs and they believed, we are told. But as soon as Moses puts God's demands to Pharaoh, Pharaoh makes the slaves' lot harder, and the Israelite supervisors come to Moses and complain. It's the start of a pattern. And Moses feels mistreated, not by the people but by God, praying, *O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people.* Exodus 5: 22-23

Now, faced again with criticism, Moses reacts defensively. And that was like oil on a fire. Then the people really did criticize him! "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" We saw it after Katrina, when things were terrible, and Government officials tried to tell people things were as good as could be expected, when officials tried to justify themselves, when they reacted defensively: people just got angrier and angrier: and that's what happened here at Rephardim.

Now, faced with the escalating controversy, Moses FINALLY prays: but not for the needs of the people. Moses prays about his leadership crisis. He prays about his fears for himself. And his prayer changes things. God responds; but not to the people's criticisms or to Moses' fears. God isn't interested in their controversy. God doesn't take sides. God is not defensive! God changes the whole context of discussion—when I read it, it felt like I exhaled; the tension went out of the text. God responds to the prayer that should have been prayed at the start. God responds to the need for water.

And God tells Moses what has to be done. He has to go on ahead of the people, he needs to be a leader; but not alone. When leaders are beleaguered, when ministers are overwhelmed, it's often because they don't seek help.

“Take some of the elders of Israel with you,” God says, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile. Take what you already have at hand, take this symbol of authority and power I have already given you; and use it in new ways to meet new needs. 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. It’s such a spare ending—no dramatics. Moses prayed. God told him what to do. As so often in scripture we are reminded that God works through us. Thank God, it’s not all up to us; but it’s also not all up to God. Moses prayed. God told him what to do. Moses did it. Then comes the surprise ending of what’s not here. We aren’t even told it worked! Wouldn’t you expect praise and thanksgiving? A song? A Psalm? Wouldn’t you expect Moses to commemorate God’s faithfulness? Wouldn’t you expect the place to be named Providence, or New Hope or at least Eureka? Nope, we get Moses, still stuck in the old conflict, naming the place Massah and Meribah, contention and quarrel, because the Israelites asked there, as they asked again and again, as we ask again and again, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’

That’s the question at the heart of faith, isn’t it, especially when times are desperate. Can we trust the provider in the absence of provisions? Can we trust God’s presence, when what we loved is lost? Are past blessings enough, when present need is acute? We make deals with God, but find it’s not God’s deal. We think we have a promise of success or safety or abundance, and feel betrayed when life takes a different turn. Even to the most faithful, almost everything may be lost. What God promises is God’s presence. Everything else may change, but not that.

A parishioner in Hartland, my first church, reintroduced me to a poem from my Sunday School youth. I had thought it kind of trite, slight. What did I know? I was young. It came again to me from a sturdy, faithful, feisty woman, Barbara, just after her husband died of brain cancer. While he was failing, Barbara’s 4 year old granddaughter who lived across the street was diagnosed with a brain tumor. In the midst of this, one of Barbara’s daughters, the single parent of two adopted children, came home to live as she struggled with invasive breast cancer. When Barbara and I met to plan her husband’s funeral she gave me a poem and asked that it be put on the cover of the funeral bulletin. It was the poem from my youth. It wasn’t trite or slight coming from her hand. You may know it, it’s by Annie Johnson Flint, who was crippled most of her life with severe arthritis.

*God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;*

*God hath not promised
sun without rain,
joy without sorrow,
peace without pain.*

*God hath not promised
smooth roads and wide,
swift easy travel,
needing no guide.*

*God hath not promised
we shall not bear
many a burden,
many a care.*

*But God hath promised
strength for the day,
rest for the laborer,
light for the way,
grace for the trials,
help from above,
unfailing sympathy,
undying love.*

“Is the Lord among us or not?” God doesn’t blame us for the question.
but answers,

“Go on, I will be there: that’s the promise;
strike the rock: that’s our task;
and water will come: that’s God’s Word.

Thanks be to God. Amen.