

O Healing River

Exodus 17:1-7

Have you ever noticed how often water is spoken of in the Bible? I found myself reflecting on that as I was preparing to speak today. From Genesis to Revelation, water plays a part in the story of God.

In Genesis two of the first acts of Creation are to separate waters, first by sky and then by land. The Garden of Eden was created with a river running through it that became 4 mighty rivers: the Pishon, the Gishon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. These rivers brought life to the lands through which they traveled. When all the earth became corrupt to the point that God could no longer allow it to continue, a great flood engulfed every living thing, save Noah and those he had gathered into the Ark. Later Abraham's servant met Rebecca, future bride of Isaac, at a well. Isaac's grandson, Joseph, found himself thrown into a cistern (full or dry, we don't know) while his brothers contemplate how to rid themselves of this little brother with big dreams. Of course, we are all familiar with the Exodus story of God parting the Red Sea so His people can safely escape Pharaoh's approaching army. And God once again parted seas as His people finally reached the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan River on dry ground.

The story of Jesus continues to feature water, as he was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. When he began his ministry, Jesus' first miracle was performed at a wedding where he turned water into wine. He revealed himself as the Messiah to a Samaritan woman as he asked her for a drink when she came to draw water from the well. Jesus on more than one occasion calms storms at sea when the apostles thought they would be overcome by the rising waters. And the Apostle John writes in the Book of Revelation about the river of life, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb,

running down the middle of the great street of the city, the New Jerusalem, each side lined with the tree of life.

In God's story water creates and sustains life, destroys life in a worldwide flood, preserves life by allowing safe passage through deep waters, brings pleasure to life in the form of wine at a wedding, proves His power over Creation, and in the final chapters gives glory to God and the Lamb in the New Jerusalem. So, you can see that water plays a significant part in the story of God.

Water also plays a significant part in our lives. Think about this. You worked out in the yard on a hot summer's day and because of your exertion you were dripping with sweat and the one thing you most desired at the end of your toil was a tall, cold glass of water. Since our bodies are made up of approximately 60% water, whenever we lose water, through sweat or otherwise, we need to replace it. Although we can live about 3 weeks without food, we can only live 3 days without water. Water is vitally important to our basic survival.

Now picture yourself in the middle of the desert with no oasis in sight. You have been traveling in the desert heat for quite some time and are now very thirsty. With no water in your wineskins and no pond or river in sight, what do you do? Do you send out search parties in all directions to scout out the closest oasis? Do you look for a divining rod to point the way to the nearest unexposed well? Or do you respond like the Israelites did in our story today? Almost from the outset of their journey, each time they felt they were in a tough spot the Israelites complained to Moses.

Not only did they complain to Moses, but they also blamed him for their situation. This same Moses who only a short time before was hailed as their hero for freeing them from

slavery in Egypt, they now accused of trying to kill them in the desert. How quickly the tides can turn, and a person goes from exalted hero to despised villain.

The people had seen Moses confront Pharaoh, they had experienced protection from the plagues that beset Egypt, they crossed the Red Sea in safety, and had even received food in the way of manna and quail when Moses had interceded with God on their behalf. Wouldn't that be enough to label Moses a good guy? Apparently not, because in this moment, when they are almost blinded by their thirst, they turn on Moses and accuse him of evil intentions. They are prepared to believe the worst about Moses. But this isn't fair. Moses was not the one who sent plagues against Egypt, nor did he with his own words wall up the waters of the Red Sea. And the bread of heaven they had been receiving daily was not prepared over the fires at Moses' tent. All these things were manifestations of God. Moses is only the visible representation of God to the people.

With 4,000 years of hindsight, we are aware that the people are being tested by their trials in the desert. In the moment of their need, however, they are testing God with their complaints. They needed to have faith that the God who freed them from Egypt and provided food in the desert would also provide the most basic of human necessities – water – in their time of need. And well they should because this is not the first time in their journey that they were in need of water. When they had traveled as far as Marah, they were in need of water then, but the waters at Marah were bitter. God told Moses to throw a piece of wood into the water that made it sweet and pleasant to drink.

At that time the Lord issued a challenge to the people when he said:

Exodus 15:26-27 (NIV2011)

²⁶ ... “If you listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring

on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.”

Following that decree the people came to Elim where there were 12 springs and 70 palm trees. The Lord provided both water and shelter and the people camped there.

Despite already having been given water, rest, and even food, why is Moses having to deal with this complaining group again? It is because they still needed to learn that God was with them and would provide their needs, even when they couldn't immediately see that it was so. They were wandering in the desert because they didn't believe God would help them secure the land He had promised to them. When they were hungry, they longed for Egypt where food was readily available instead of relying on God to supply their need in the desert. Now they are once again doubting that God will meet their needs and are placing the blame on Moses.

How often are we like the Israelites in the desert? If things aren't going our way, do we look for a scapegoat? Is there a Moses in our lives that we can point our fingers at and say, “This is all YOUR fault!”? Do we grow impatient waiting for something to happen?

I think a common human ill is impatience. We want what we want, and we want it now! This is pretty strong in the US where we have not only what we need, but an abundance of stuff beyond what is necessary. In this country we are able to get almost anything we need or desire with a simple phone call or a few mouse clicks on our computers. Our goodies are even delivered to our doorstep. We don't even have to leave our homes to have all our desires filled. Thank you, Amazon and UPS! We can relate to the Israelites and their desire to have what they want immediately, especially when what they want is life sustaining.

God knew that having their needs filled immediately would not help them learn to depend on His generous nature. They needed to have some patience, trusting God to provide, before they had the opportunity to see God in action, so to speak. They needed to trust that the God who brought them safe this far, would see them through to the end of their journey.

When Moses and the elders finally assembled in front of the rock face Moses struck the rock at the precise spot God pointed out to him, using the same rod that he used to strike the Nile River. When Moses struck the Nile with this rod, the river turned to blood and everything in it died. The water flowing from the rock, however, was clear and clean, refreshing, and life giving. And it was not a trickle that emanated from the rock either, it was a river. A trickle would not satisfy the million or so people dying of thirst in the desert, only a river would do. And only God could make a river flow from solid rock.

God once again had provided for his people. But although he had already freed them from oppression in Egypt, saved them from an advancing army, sent daily food, and was present with them in the pillar of smoke and fire daily, this would not be the last time they were tempted to grumble. Each time they would find themselves in a tough spot, they would doubt that their God was able to deliver them from their distress.

Charles Swindoll has something to say about this tendency to doubt:

Your adversary would love for you to assume the worst about your situation. He would enjoy seeing you heave a sigh and resign yourself to feelings of depression. However, it's been my experience that when God is involved, anything can happen. The One who directed that stone in between Goliath's eyes and split the Red Sea down the middle and leveled that wall around Jericho and brought His Son back

from beyond takes delight in mixing up the odds as He alters the inevitable and bypasses the impossible.

Wandering in the desert, the Israelites were sure that it was inevitable that they would die of thirst when no water could be found. And how impossible was it to think that water should proceed out of solid rock? They had forgotten just who their God was and what He was capable of doing.

God knows that we are no different from those people who wandered in the desert. We will be tempted to doubt throughout our lives. Even though we may be able to point to places in our lives when God has provided, just as the Israelites did, we are still tempted to be shortsighted when we find ourselves in a tight spot. He knows that unless we learn to depend on Him in *everything*, in the good times and the bad, we will be easily swayed by the Evil One. Yes, we will be tempted to doubt, but hear these words from the Apostle Paul when he spelled out the rewards of facing our temptations when he wrote these words in Romans 5:

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

The river that flowed from the rock in the Palestinian desert gave healing and hope to a thirsting people, once again reminding them that their God was the God of the impossible. That He could heal their ills, their parched souls, as easily as tapping a rock with a stick.

Today that hope lives on through the gift of Living Water given to us in Jesus Christ, who in our own desert journeys is there to offer sustenance, comfort, and guidance. This brings to mind the words of that old hymn:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood,
from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure;
save from wrath and make me pure.

Jesus, the Rock of Ages, will heal the ills of doubt and worry that we are subjected to in our lives. He offers refreshment for our dry and thirsting spirits. He calls each of us today to, “Come and drink,” from the healing river provided by our God.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, We are sorry for the times we are impatient and give into grumbling against you. You are the Living Water that sustains us throughout our lives, in times of abundance and in times of want. Thank you for your provision despite our grumbling. We are truly blessed through the gift of your son, Jesus. AMEN

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