

Exodus 17:1-7
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Thirsty, Thirsty

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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?"

How do we know if God is with us?
Is the Lord among us or not?
That's how this passage ends;
with naming a question
every single one of us
has surely asked before.
*How do we know...*how do we determine
if God's presence is among us or not?

I have no doubt
I would have been a thorn in Moses' side.
If we want to characterize the Israelites as a whole,
based just on the witness of the book of Exodus
—we might describe the Hebrew people
as irritable, whiny,
skeptical, dramatic, impatient.
So basically, these are my people.
I am so good at all these things,
like all of the time.
I would have been a model Israelite
if their Exodus behavior on display
was the criteria.

“Why did you bring us out of Egypt,
to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”
So dramatic.
So, me.

Like any of us when faced with a crisis,
the Israelites have selective memory.
They have already forgotten
all the other miraculous things
the Lord has done.
Freeing them from Egypt,
the plagues, the Passover,
the parting of the Red Sea,
the quail and that manna
from only a chapter ago.

They have even forgotten Exodus 15, Lord,
where the only water to drink was bitter
and so, they complained to your servant Moses
asking what they would drink.
They have forgotten it all,
because right now
they are thirsty:
really,
really thirsty.

It isn't so far-fetched of the people
to feel this way
—after all, when we have
what we need and want,
we don't usually ask the question,
is the Lord among us.

It's when **there IS need and want**,
that we turn to more
pensive and existential questions.
When a flash flood washes away homes,
we wonder, why Lord?
Are you with us?
When bottom falls out
and we lose a job we wonder,
why me Lord,
don't you love my family?

So, in their moment of need
when God's people are desperately thirsty,
they ask, what' the deal Lord?
Is this what freedom feels like?
Are you the God who saved us,
and promised to be with us?
We are feeling faint,
we can't possibly go on...

In decent conditions, average-ish temps,
the human body can go about 100 hours,
so roughly 4ish days,
without water.

If, however you throw in high temperatures
that can often occur in the Sinai region,
I looked it up on Thursday,
it was 104 degrees F
well, statistically anything above 90 degrees
with limited activity
will cut the survival rate
by two.

So, we are now possibly looking
at 50 hours of survival time.
Take into account
that the people are moving/marching in stages
through the desert and hauling their children,
which I imagine is similar
to dragging your children
through Lowes grocery
while you both wear a mask
—so, the people are marching
through the desert with children
and everything they own: their cows, sheep,
goats, chickens, donkeys
(but not pigs) ...

I've sat on my front porch this summer
and broken a sweat—just sitting—
which means traveling with all of that stuff
would make any one sweat like, buckets
...so, you add in the water you lose
from sustained sweating
—and the time drops
from 50 hours to 7.¹

¹ Adapted from Anthea Portier-Young, Commentary on Exodus 17:1-7
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3432

This is what the landscape
looks like today
—when our group went last year.



Y'all it was hot.
And it wasn't June, July or August—it was September.
And we rode around
on an air-conditioned bus
and were still hot.

Our guide, Boaz,
didn't make us march around the bus
—thanks be to God—
but when we traveled to the south of Israel
we got a sense of the heat
and what it could have been like
to be an Israelite wandering
through this barren landscape.

Our bus had a cooler
with waters on it too.

So, I can imagine
how unbelievably ornery
marching around, thirsty and tired
God's people would have been.

Which really makes me think,
perhaps the people aren't being
as dramatic as we think they are.
After all this is a matter of survival;
but at its heart
it is not really thirst
but presence that the people are after.
It's one-part assurance
that they have not traveled this far

only to die in the wilderness of thirst,
but another part assurance
that God is still with them,
meeting their needs.

That God's presence is among them.

Is the Lord among us or not?

So, in a way it is about survival,
because of thirst,
but also because of presence.

Bad-tempered Israelites
aren't a new thing in scripture
—faithful grumbling and whining
isn't anything new
for any religious tradition
for that matter.

In fact, another pastor and I
were talking about how Exodus
is the ground hog day of Israel's story
—the same things happen over and over,
again, and again.

It's like quarantine in that regard.

The people rejoice over God's triumphs
and then hit a hardship
and question if God even loves them.

There is a mess up and correction,
mess up and correction.

But the question Israel demands of Moses
is a legitimate one.

You speak for God Moses,
so, tell us,

did God free us from slavery in Egypt
only to abandon us
in the wilderness?

Where is the cloud and pillar of fire
that accompanied Charlton Heston?

What sign could Moses give,
so that the people would know
that God was in front of
or behind them?
Is the Lord among us or not?

Later on, in Exodus,
the Lord's presence among the people
stirs up fear in their hearts.
When the Lord descends on Mount Sinai
and the mountain itself trembles
and the Lord thunders,
the people are a quivering mess,
begging Moses to go talk to God
on their behalf.

We have to wonder,
Would they even be ready
for God to be among them?

I've always loved the quote by Annie Dillard,
that does such a good job
talking about the presences of the Lord.

She writes,

“On the whole,
I do not find Christians,
outside of the catacombs,
sufficiently sensible of conditions.
Does anyone have the foggiest idea
what sort of power we so blithely invoke?
Or, as I suspect,
does no one believe a word of it?
The churches are children
playing on the floor with their chemistry sets,
mixing up a batch of TNT
to kill a Sunday morning.
It is madness to wear
ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church;
we should all be wearing crash helmets.
Ushers should issue
life preservers and signal flares;

they should lash us to our pews.
For the sleeping god
may wake someday and take offense,
or the waking god
may draw us out
to where we can never return. ”²

Israel’s constant **wandering**
in pursuit of God’s promise
and constant **wondering**
if their God was with them,
is the theme of scripture.
It is the continual lesson of God
drawing them out to where
they can never return.
You can’t go back to Egypt
because I am making you
into a new people
who will be my witnesses.
You can’t go back to household gods and idols
because I am the living God
in whom there is no equal.

That might be the Lord’s declaration,
but what the people want is a visible sign,
a tangible totem,
that reassures them of God’s presence.

This isn’t just an Old Testament question,
is the Lord among us or not?

In the gospel of John,
you’d find another story
about being thirsty
and being in God’s presence.

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/170797-on-the-whole-i-do-not-find-christians-outside-of#:~:text=It%20is%20madness%20to%20wear,where%20we%20can%20never%20return.%20%E2%80%9D>

This story is of the woman
who comes to the well
at the hottest part of the day to draw water
and she meets Jesus.

He's thirsty and asks her for water.
This turns into a theological discussion
(because it is Jesus)
about where to find water
and where to find God.

As they talk,
the Samaritan woman points out
to Jesus, the Jew,
that his people claim God's presence
is only with them
in Jerusalem, in the temple.

And yet, she informs him,
her ancestors worshipped God right here,
on the mountain, in Samaria.

She too is trying to determine
where God's presence is.
Can you hear the Israelites' question,
Is the Lord among us or not,
as she questions Jesus?

When Jesus answers her,
she isn't expecting his reply.
Jesus's answer,
is that God's presence
is right in front of her,
offering her living water
to quench her thirst.

"For Christians, John's Gospel teaches,
God dwells, speaks and acts
in the fragile one who knows completely
the absence of God
and who abides even now in that absence,

so long as the thirst for living water
still lingers in the world.”³

We believe that God’s presence abides
in the resurrected Christ
who married himself to the Church.
A bunch of rag-tag, imperfect
wanders and followers of Christ
—the one who quenches our thirst.

In Exodus, Moses takes elders
from his community with him
to be witnesses God’s presence
and ask for water.
So, when we thirst for God’s presence,
when find ourselves in heated situations
or when we find ourselves parched in the wilderness
looking for God,
looking for living water,
we will likely need some help;
we will likely need each other.

Is the Lord among us or not?

This is the question we ask
when there is a need;
this is the question we ask
when there is want.
I know there is need in us,
I know there is want in us.

And I know that deep down
a lot of that need and want
is assurance that everything’s going to be okay;
that everything will be alright in the end.

As faithful people we are the witnesses
to our city, our country, to our children
that there is living water to be found.

³ Frederick Niedner, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2, Third Sunday in Lent* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2010) pg. 78

We need to drink from that water the Lord provides
so that when the question arises
from our neighbor or from our own heart,
is the Lord among us or not;
when that question arises,
we will be ready with signs of assurance.

I on social media,
what signs are there
that God is still with us?
How do you know the Lord is among us?

I got answers like, look in the mirror;
and
seeing so many folks at Nancy Willingham's funeral;
and
the birth of my granddaughter who weighed 1lb 11oz;
and
hearing your two-year-old grandchild say, my Gami

You all sent in pictures and images
of how you know the Lord is among us.

Some of these images and people
you will likely recognize
and some of them you may not.
But that's how it is with God
—the Lord is often hidden
in cloud, fire,
woman, man,
baby birds and sunsets.

When we are worn down
to what feels like our final hours of survival,
I pray that our community
of elders and youth,
artists and accountants,
furniture execs and factory workers
will be the witnesses to accompany each other,
that we will reassure each other

that these are indeed
the signs that
the Lord is still among us.
Amen.