

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 27, 2020**

**“The Lord Among Us”
Exodus 17:1-7
(Manuscript Draft)**

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Our Old Testament reading—like our world today—is a place of uncertainty, struggle, and testing...

Bruce Curtis read for us the story of water from the rock, from the book of Exodus. The outlines of the story are maybe familiar to you: God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, then led them through the wilderness until they reach a waterless place, where they thirst, where they confront Moses, where he prays...and where God makes water pour from a rock, so that God’s people can drink. It’s the story of that place Moses names “Massah” and “Meribah”: meaning, “place of testing” and “place of quarrelling.”

The outlines of the story are perhaps familiar—but it may surprise you how this story gets remembered elsewhere in the Old Testament. If someone were to read the Old Testament (for the first time) back-to-front, reading the books in reverse canonical order, they’d likely get quite a different impression of what went on at Massah and Meribah—since elsewhere in Scripture, this place is synonymous with faithlessness. The story became a kind of stock example of what not to do and how not to act.

Moses—maybe not surprisingly, since he feared for his life—Moses had unpleasant memories of this incident, later reminding the Israelites “at Massah [...] you provoked the LORD to wrath” (Deut. 9:22). But the infamy of this episode stretches far further in Scripture—it’s so serious, in fact, that it got its commandment, its own “Thou Shalt Not” in the Book of Deuteronomy: “Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah” (Deut. 6:16).

And then, in the Psalms, we hear a solemn warning:

“Do not harden your hearts

as you did at Meribah,
as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness,
where your ancestors tested me;
they tried me, though they had seen what I did.
For forty years I was angry with that generation;
I said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they have not known my ways” (95:8-10).

Now if someone—reading the Old Testament, for the first time, back-to-front—came across such stinging condemnations of the Israelites at Massah and Meribah, if you read all that not knowing the story of water from the rock, you’d conclude that the Israelites had done something really quite heinous. You’d think, “Good grief, what did they do there?!” Probably, by the time you’d worked your way backwards to the story itself in Exodus chapter 17, you’d think: “Oh no! I can’t look!”

And yet, at first glance, the story itself doesn’t seem to merit this notorious reputation... The Israelites suffered thirst, argued with Moses about their need for water, then God provides. Really, what’s so nefarious about that? The question is: what about this story made it shorthand for faithlessness? Put simply: what went wrong at Massah and Meribah?

It’s an important question, because it leads us to the heart of this grace-filled story...though we won’t get anywhere by looking down on the Israelites or dismissing their struggles. This story begins in a real place of human struggle and suffering: the Israelites thirst—their children and animals thirst—and thirst is terrifying. Their vulnerability, their fear, the danger they’re facing, it all pours out in that anguished plea to Moses: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (v. 3). We can only sympathize with the Israelites’ fears here.

But notice also how their struggles impact their faith; notice—and this key—notice how their struggles lead the Israelites to doubt God’s presence with them. At the beginning of the story, we heard how “the Israelites journeyed [...] as the LORD commanded” (v. 1): the

agency and action of God is clear as God leads God's people day-by-day. Yet, when the Israelites are suffering thirst, they no longer speak of God's presence, God's leading: "Why did you bring us," they ask Moses, "why did you bring us" to this place of thirst? Amid their struggles, God's leading presence seems less credible, less believable: when the water dries up, so too does their certainty of God's presence.

In that waterless place, as their venture across the wilderness appeared doomed, it seems the Israelites came to doubt that God could really be present anymore... One scholar writes: in their thirst, "they deem themselves abandoned or betrayed. Worse, they wonder if God [had] ever traveled with them" (Niedner). Their doubt about God's presence becomes crystal clear in the final verse of the story, where we hear that Moses "called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" (v. 7).

"Is the LORD among us or not?" At Massah and Meribah, the Israelites demanded water...but that's not what made this story notorious in Scripture. Here—at Massah and Meribah—here the Israelites came to believe (or at least to fear) that struggle, suffering, and failure signal the absence of God. Here they came to fear that when we struggle and suffer and fail, it means that God is with us no longer.

I think we know what that can look like, in our own lives: like the Israelites, we can doubt God's presence when we face failures, afraid for the future; like the Israelites at Massah and Meribah, we too can find ourselves asking, when things go wrong, "Is the Lord among us or not?" I was once on a train, just pulling into Montreal, when a fellow passenger saw among my belongings a Bible: he asked, "You're a Christian?" When I confirmed, he—with no prompting at all—he blurted out, "It can be so easy to believe in God when things go well...but when things go badly, it can be so hard." Off he went, this sort of prophetic passenger, but I've often reflected about what was at root of that Via-Rail confession, how when we expect to discern God only in our victories, then—amid our struggles—we begin asking: "Is the Lord among us or not?" I'm reminded also of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian executed by the Nazi regime (who was also the subject of my PhD), who wrote in 1938 about the struggles of fellow Christians in Nazi Germany: "when serious

difficulties become evident,” he wrote, “we convince ourselves [...] that God is no longer with us” (*DBWE* 15:82).

“[T]he Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” (v. 7). And yet, nevertheless, at Massah and Meribah, God meets God’s people in their doubt: God responds to their physical need and their crisis of faith with one, single, gracious act, giving them water and God’s own presence: “The LORD said to Moses: [...] 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” (v. 6). The Israelites, struggling, even despairing, they ask: “Is the LORD among us or not?”—and, as water poured from that rock, God responds with an unmistakable, resounding Yes! Yes, even amid struggle and suffering and failure: Yes, even then, the Lord is among us.

I had a very helpful conversation with a Jewish colleague earlier this week about our reading from Exodus, and about an ancient Jewish interpretation of this story that—maybe as a way of celebrating God’s presence with Israel in the wilderness, at Massah and Meribah—that expanded this story with a kind of pious legend, that the rock itself went on to follow the Israelites across the wilderness (*L.A.B.*, 11.15). And this added detail—that the rock followed them—if that sounds familiar to you, it’s because St. Paul invokes this image in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 10, when he says that the Israelites “passed through the sea [...] and drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and”—St. Paul adds, connecting the story to the faith of the early church—“and the rock was Christ” (v. 4).

The story of water from the rock is such a compelling witness to God’s presence amid our struggles, that—when later interpreters reimagined the story—they envisioned this sign of God’s presence not as a stationary rock that the Israelites left behind but instead as a sign that travelled with them, following them and sustaining them throughout their journey. As one scholar puts it, this rock became “a powerful symbol of the gifts of God to his people” and “a symbol of the concern of God for his people” (Harvey). The 23rd Psalm includes that memorable verse, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”—and a friend of mine likes to paraphrase that as “the twin hounds of goodness

and mercy are hot on our trail!” It may be that—when ancient Jewish and Christian interpreters imagined the rock following the Israelites—they had something similar in mind: God revealed God’s presence on that rock at Horeb, amid the struggles and suffering of the Israelites—and God gives that same gift again and again. Even in our more faithless moments, at the Massahs and Meribahs of our own lives, God gives us his presence anew: that rock follows us, too.

That’s why this story from Exodus is so nourishing, so encouraging: this story reveals how God is with us in our struggles, present alongside us in the midst of the messiness of human life: “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb,” we hear in Exodus; and St. Paul connects that rock with Christ, who—in the wilderness of our lives—remains with us and nourishes us, like that water-springing rock following God’s people in their journey. Reflect on this for a moment: think of this... When you struggle or suffer some loss, when you doubt the reality of God’s presence...look! There’s that rock with you and following you, the rock that sustains you, the rock that is Christ.

As I preach for the call, I didn’t select this story from Exodus; it just happens to be the Lectionary text today. However, I’m delighted to explore this story together, this surprising story of God’s presence amid adversity, because this story displays for us something that’s central to my outlook on church and on ministry: here, as church—whether in-person or remotely—here we celebrate and share in Christ’s presence; here, as church, we can be shaped and reshaped as a community of Christ’s compassion through the presence of Christ’s Spirit. As one guiding document of the Presbyterian Church puts it, “The church is Christ together with his people” (*Living Faith*): Christ’s presence is what makes us church, and makes church joyful and meaningful and life-giving. In the thirst of our lives, in the wildernesses we experience, we can yet gather around Christ, the rock given to us, and rejoice in Christ’s sustaining presence together.

“[T]he Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’—and as a resounding and gracious Yes, God answers: “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock.” Thanks be to God! Amen.