

He Struck the Rock, and Water Flowed Out  
The Rev. Amy Spagna  
March 12, 2023 (Lent 3A)  
Exodus 17:1-17

As most of you know, the Sunday lectionary operates on a three-year cycle. The last time this set of readings appeared, on March 15, 2020, was the day after the shutdown order came down, so we didn't get to gather to hear them as a community. I remember watching the livestream from a nearly empty National Cathedral that morning, and thinking about how appropriate it was to be hearing about thirst and living water and faith in the face of what proved to be a once-in-a-century crisis. Reading through all of them again, particularly the passage from Exodus, brought back so much of the earliest days of the pandemic. It reminded me about how afraid we were, and how little we actually knew about this new coronavirus aside from how it had killed a lot of people.

It didn't help that so many of our elected leaders, along with the media, only seemed to add to the panic, instead of doing the necessary and hard thing of being a calm presence. Even in less fraught times, we hold them to high standards, especially when it comes to protecting the safety and prosperity we've come to expect. When they don't measure up in some way – for example, in failing to make a calm and timely response to a crisis situation of any sort, or in displaying a distinct lack of ethical and moral behavior - we scream loudly about it. It's not as helpful as we think it is, however. It turns the spotlight firmly on to them and away from whatever problem has cropped up. It only makes us feel even more anxious, which in turn short-circuits our ability to reason and to work together to find a solution.

Shifting focus onto a person instead of the actual problem is exactly what happens to Moses. It's not the first time the people would yell at him about their situation, and nor will it be the last. They've been complaining almost nonstop since escaping slavery in Egypt and heading out across the wilderness toward Canaan. At the first major rest stop, Marah, the water tastes bitter. They next arrive at the wilderness of Sin, and can't find anything to eat. At Rephidim, this latest stop, there's not enough water to go around. Both of the previous times, God intervened to save them, or at least keep them from whining for a while. At Marah, God showed Moses a piece of wood which he then used to make the water taste better. In the wilderness of Sin, God promised to rain down bread from heaven – otherwise known as manna, the fine flaky stuff the people picked up and ate every day for the 40 years of their journey. And yet, the people still don't seem to trust Moses or God very much, thanks to their very real fears about surviving in a hostile environment.

This latest challenge, a lack of water, is particularly dangerous. The exertion of traveling with their children, livestock, and material possessions across the desert limits their endurance to as little as seven hours. And as we all know, nothing can survive without adequate water – especially not people. It's understandable that they're asking some really hard questions about what they are doing there in the first place. This isn't like C3PO wandering by himself across the desert of Tatooine at the beginning of the first *Star Wars* movie, and cursing R2D2 for tricking him into going the wrong way. What the people are really asking through their complaints is if God is with them, or not, and

in the most visceral of ways. Because if God is not with them, then what the bleep are they doing out here in the first place?<sup>1</sup>

To frame their wondering another way:

If God is with us, why doesn't God just leave supplies for us along the way?

If God is with us, why do bad things keep happening to us?

Answering these questions is not something that not even Moses, with all of the gifts he has and his special connection with God, can answer. It isn't that Moses isn't also afraid of dying out in the wilderness. It is that these types of existential questions about where God is and what God is doing defy easy answers. Sometimes there just isn't a "why" in situations like the one Moses faces. It just is. What we do in the middle of it is what matters, even when we complain, and echo what Teresa of Avila expressed about God after she was thrown from a horse: "If this is how you treat people, it's a wonder you have so many friends!"

Moses does the one thing he knows will work, screaming to God for help. What he gets is probably not what he has in mind, but it works, and probably better than anything he could have come up with on his own. How well it serves to calm the people's fears in the long run, we don't really know. However, the name of the place, Massah and Meribah, serves as a permanent reminder that the "... Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" (Exodus 17:7, NRSV)

The main issue with any event like this one is how fear shorts out our ability to use reason, and to trust in anyone else. You remember how people started hoarding

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<sup>1</sup> Anatheia Portier-Young, "Commentary on Exodus 17:1-7." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-exodus-171-7-11> [accessed March 9, 2023].

things like N95 masks, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer when it looked like this coronavirus thing was about to get really bad? In hindsight, it wasn't really all that different from the reason why the Israelites started arguing with Moses. They needed to put their anxiety somewhere, and poor Moses just happened to be the easiest target.

Fear can be just as contagious as a virus is among groups of people, and most especially when there is a lot of bad information, or no information, about the very thing that's the cause of the fear. Moses himself voices it when he complains to God that the people are out to get him, and can't calm them down on his own. However, because God is God, and God is faithful, God shows the people that their fears are unfounded. God instructs Moses to strike the rock with his staff so water flows out, thus both quenching the people's literal thirst and their existential fears about their very survival.

We've had our fair share of "Moses moments" in the past few years. No doubt there will be many more of them ahead of us. We can't predict how, or what, or when they will happen. We do, fortunately, have control over how we react to it. We can put the phone down, turn off the news, take the dog out for a walk, or go hiking, or go look at this spring's seed catalog. We can go about life as usual, including checking in on each other and continuing to cultivate trust in one another, and in God's presence among us. As this chapter in Exodus reminds us, God does show up, in God's good time and in God's own way, and we really don't need to expend so much energy on being afraid that God has abandoned us.