

Sermon for August 9, 2020
Darren Wright preaching

“Thirsty in the Wilderness”
Exodus 17:1-7

Growing up, my family moved out to Fairview during the summer before my 6th grade year. A friend of mine came to visit shortly after we moved and, in case you haven't been to Fairview, there's not a ton of stuff to do. But they did have a big park, Bowie Nature park, which had mountain biking and hiking trails.

The park was about a mile from our house so we set off on our bikes at about 7:30am to go explore and try and beat the late July heat. We got to the park and while we weren't on fancy mountain bikes, or even regular mountain bikes, we figured the baseball cards clipped onto our wheels gave us the edge we needed to take on the longest trail at the park which was just over 10 miles.

We had a blast for a couple hours and thought we were headed back toward the trailhead until we looked at our watch and it was almost noon and we were still biking around with trees and trails that all looked the same. This was before the days of cell phones and we were biking on a weekday, in Fairview, so the whole time we had been there we hadn't seen another person. We started to get a bit nervous.

We were lost, and I was feeling a bit hungry, but more than that, it's the earliest memory I have of being really thirsty. My mouth and throat were getting dry and our water bottles were empty.

We kept riding around looking for familiar landmarks to get out and after about 4 more hours I had made the transition from worried that we would be in trouble for getting home late to trying to remember how long a person could go without water and hoping my mom would come find us.

Mercifully, about an hour later, we came across another group of bikers and they told us we were only about a mile from the trailhead. They pointed us in the right direction and about 30 minutes later we made it to my house.

My mom was understandably upset and wanted to know where the heck we had been and I told her I'd tell her the whole story, but my throat was so dry it was hard to talk and before I did anything else, I just needed a drink of water.

Have you ever been thirsty? Like really thirsty? On our youth choir tours every year we remind people if you are thirsty that's your body telling you that you are already a little dehydrated. And when we go on our Appalachia Service Project trips we incessantly repeat the phrase hydrate before you diehydrate.

There are parts of the world where a lack of access to water is profoundly shaping people's abilities to live. Being thirsty is no laughing matter. It's life or death. When your body isn't getting water you get thirsty and fatigued, then headaches set in, your immune systems starts to function poorly, your blood thickens and your heart has to work harder to maintain blood pressure, you might get light headed or dizzy, your muscles start to cramp up, your body struggles to regulate your body temperature, and after a couple days your body shuts down completely.

So when the Israelites are complaining of being thirsty after hot days of walking and carrying their belongings through the wilderness they aren't just asking for water, they are asking for life. And perhaps more than that they are asking fundamental questions about this God that they have risked everything to follow, they are asking just what kind of God this is and what kind of life this God has in store for them.

And these questions, this thirst for a different way of life and a different kind of God are a defining theme of these people in Exodus. Earlier in the story in Exodus 14, when they arrive at the Red Sea and look back to see the Egyptians close on their heels, they cry out, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?...It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness," (Exodus 14:11-12).

Three days later, they were thirsty but the only water was so bitter it wasn't drinkable so they asked "What shall we drink?" (Exodus 15:24).

A few weeks later, they were hungry and complained, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:3).

And now our text for today, the Israelites arrive at Rephadim and there isn't any water. They are thirsty and so they ask "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?...Is the Lord really with us or not?" (Exodus 17:2-3, 7).

And usually when I've read this narrative by this point I'm like seriously, ya'll are still complaining?! Remember the sea parting? Remember the pillars of cloud and fire? Remember the manna? God has shown up time and again and ya'll still aren't getting it.

But, perhaps because we find ourselves in the midst of a Pandemic and I find myself desperately thirsting for a vaccine or effective treatment,
for an end to quarantine,
for black lives to matter,
for us to gather again in this sanctuary to worship and take communion together,
for voting rights to not be something we have to fight for,
for an end to the constant wondering if our kiddos should be in school or out of school,
for schools and teachers to receive the funding needed to do the heroic work of educating and feeding and caring for young people,

for thirst and hunger and homes and healthcare to no longer be commodities that we only offer to those who are deemed worthy by a capitalistic system that places profits before people,
for not having to wear masks,
for hugging my mom and dad...

I'm tired and thirsty and find myself wondering what is going on God? Are you really with us or not?

And so as I reflected on the text this time, I found myself siding with the Israelites as they are thirsty and exhausted and maybe frustrated with always having to plead their case. They might have been wondering if the water and manna and pillars of cloud and fire would have even happened if they hadn't kept crying out?

I imagine working hard carrying their stuff and walking all day feels all too similar to another day in servitude to Pharaoh...and at least with Pharaoh they got water because even Pharaoh recognized water was a necessity for life...and so they are crying out to God, we are tired and thirsty, again, are you really with us or not?

And I'm glad we had AJ Levine, one of my professors at Vanderbilt Divinity School and a brilliant biblical scholar leading an all church Sunday school recently because while that idea of being tired and thirsty and frustrated with God, of calling out to God and demanding more of God, makes me uncomfortable, I can hear AJ declaring emphatically of course they're upset with God, why wouldn't they be!

One of my favorite classes in undergrad was Intro to Jewish Philosophy and Thought...and one of the things that resonated with me within Judaism was this willingness to argue with God...to question God, to take God to task, to hold God accountable, to take seriously God's desire to be in relationship with us.

I remember we read Elie Wiesel's The Trial of God which was inspired by Wiesel's time as a 15-year old in a concentration camp where he witnessed 3 Jewish scholars indict God for allowing God's children to be massacred. They held a trial and found God guilty, and then after a period of silence, they went and said their evening prayers.

And I remember being struck and am still struck to this day at that apparent dissonance of finding God guilty of allowing God's children to be massacred and then saying their prayers, because as this story of these people in Exodus shows, it isn't dissonance at all, it's a statement about the nature of their relationship with God. It's a statement about the character of God.

These people have risked everything to follow this God that they hope is different. In an ancient world filled with a wide array of gods that were often capricious and narcissitic, this persistent questioning and crying out to God in this Exodus narrative isn't rooted in a lack of faith, it's rooted in belief and hope and a demand that this God is different than Pharaoh and all the other gods.

And the wonderfully good news in this story is God declares emphatically yes, I'm different. I'm different because I welcome your questioning. I'm different because I welcome your anger. I'm different because unlike Pharaoh and all these other Gods I desire a relationship with you. And relationships are meant to be mutual and relationships aren't about one time acts but rather ongoing, persistent, showing up and working together. I'm different because I listen and I care and if you keep showing up and trusting and journeying with me I'm going to keep showing up and trusting and journeying with you.

I'm different because when I created you I created you in my image and invited you to look after creation with me. I'm different because I made covenant with you and because I love you. I'm different because you are my co-workers and you have a part to play in this story. I'm different because I'm present and I will respond to your needs. I'm different because I don't want you to be passive or submissive because I have placed my divine spark within you and when life needs protecting and sustaining I know that spark will demand justice and action. I need that spark to demand justice and action.

I'm different because when you cry out that you are thirsty I'll hear your cries and I'll work with you to make sure you have water. I'm different because I need you to be like the Israelites in this Exodus narrative and keep crying out for all that is needed to sustain life. I'm different because I need you to be like Moses in this story and hear those cries and work with me to help bring water to thirsty people.

And if you're still doubting that this God and this relationship that God invites us into is different, think about how the text for today ends. There's this miracle as Moses listens to God and hits a rock and water springs forth and everyone can drink their fill. But Moses doesn't name the place after the miracle. Moses names the place Massah and Meribah, which translate as to try or test and to quarrel and demand and argue. It's as if Moses knows the real miracle that took place in this story is not the water flowing from the rock, but rather that there is this God who is unlike any other God, this God who is deeply relational and who covenants with us, this God who cares about us and listens and hears and responds to our crying out for life.

So if you're like the Israelites in Exodus or you're like me right now and you find yourself exhausted and thirsty in the wilderness remember we worship a God who cares and who listens. A God who celebrates and memorializes our willingness to share our anger and frustration. A God who invites us to listen to the cries of others and help where we can. A God who covenants to journey with us. A God who hears our cries of thirst and responds with life giving water.