

October 1, 2023 - Pentecost 18

Prayer of the Day

God of love, giver of life, you know our frailties and failings. Give us your grace to overcome them, keep us from those things that harm us, and guide us in the way of salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

Hebrew Scriptures - Exodus 17:1-7

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. The people quarrelled 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?" But 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?" So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The 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. 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." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Sermon

In my adult life, I've been without water twice.

The first time, we lived in a building which had been renovated into six apartment units, and in the middle of a very cold winter, the pipes froze. Fortunately, we had friends in the area who let us borrow their shower, and people in the building ran a gym who they let us use their facilities to fill up bottles for drinking, so we were fine. But for a couple days, it was interesting for two and a half days, but we were fine.

The second time was two weeks ago, with Hurricane Lee. Again, fortunately, we had warning, so we could fill our bottles and tubs before the storm arrived. And, again, we had neighbours who shared their generator with us, so we didn't lose anything in the fridge. So, it was a little interesting for a couple days.

Given this, I find I can relate, at least hypothetically, to the complaint of the Israelites in their situation.

But I have never been without the *hope* of water. I've never been in a position in which I might never have water again. I've never had to think, "I wonder if last night was my last drink?" When put in those terms, it's a scary thought.

Now, granted, the point of the story in Exodus is that God *does* take care of God's people. So that part's fine.

What makes it challenging, in part anyway, is that God seems to make a habit of having the people *run out* of something before they are provided with another, generally miraculous, source of that "thing." Whether quails in the evening, or manna in the morning, or water from a rock in today's story, the people are always at the point of starvation, or deadly thirst, or powerless and/or helpless in the face of enemies, before God actually shows up and does something.

What does *that* say about how God takes care of God's people?

Does it mean God *wants* us to suffer before we will be rescued, so that we will learn to be grateful?

Does it mean that God is trying to teach God's people some kind of "lesson," and the only way they would pay attention is by God pushing them to the brink of extinction?

Is it like the government who will allow you go on welfare, as long as you burn through all of your savings first?

Or is there something else going on?

I don't have a definitive answer. Which, I recognize, leaves us in a rather ambiguous place! But I think we need to be honest about it. The ambiguity needs to be acknowledged. Even if it drives us crazy, or makes us want to scream, or run away and hide.

But I think this story points us in another direction. Instead of pointing us to easy solutions, I think this story inspires is to ask some questions. Difficult questions. real questions.

Like maybe, If *we* are the people of God, *what is our water?* What is it that *we* are complaining about? What is it that we think *we* are missing? What is it that we can't do without anymore? What is it that we used to have, or at least the stories we tell ourselves tell us we used to have, that we have now run out of?

What's our "water"?

Put this way, it gives the lie to our obsession with convenience. This water we think we *want* might be convenience, but that's not really what we need. Our existence isn't threatened by not having an easy life.

It also puts our craving for money into some perspective, doesn't it? Sure, it makes life easier. Given the way we have structured our economy, *having* money allows us to play around *in* that economy a bit more. But if the economy changes so much that we no longer recognize it, or if inflation rises so dramatically that we can no longer play around in the economy the way we did, will money really solve our problems? Are we truly thirsty for money?

So, what *is* our water? What is it that we need so desperately that we really *are* in danger of extinction without it? What is it that we need so much, and are so unable to produce ourselves, that we really need a miracle of God to provide it?

And what happens if we don't get that miracle? What happens when we don't have a Moses who can take his staff and whack a rock and suddenly everything is better again? What happens when we don't even have a *Moses*, let alone one with with a staff, let alone a rock to whack and make everything better again! What happens we we can't "hard work" our way out, or "positive think" our way through?

What happens when the water we think we need, are *convinced* we need, doesn't come?

I know the story from Exodus we have in front of us *does* say that God *did* provide water in the wilderness. But we need to avoid trying to twist that story into a "God will always give us a miracle if you only believe" kind of story. Sometimes, God doesn't give God's people a miracle.

Or at least not the miracle we thought we wanted. Or asked for. Or assumed we needed. Or assumed we would get.

Yesterday was Indigenous People's Day. And all the new broadcasts and social media posts were coloured orange, and were about Phyllis Webstad and the other survivors of the Residential Schools, as well as all those who did *not* survive. And politicians made speeches about Indigenous rights, and others demanded that landfills be searched, and some people thought (for a little while) about land claims, and others complained about fishing rights.

And *this* morning, the news is all about everything *else*. It's no longer in front of us.

And I can't help but think about those children crying themselves to sleep each night in those schools, and wondering why there was no Moses for *them*, with a staff that could whack a rock and provide the water they needed in that moment.

I don't have an answer. I'm not sure there is one.

But I don't have answers to much smaller questions, either. So it shouldn't surprise anyone that I don't have an answer for this big questions!

At the same time, I do wonder if there might be another way through this dilemma. Not an easy way! Not a quick way. It doesn't involve whacking a rock with a staff and having things suddenly be all better.

I think it just might involve changing our understanding of what a miracle actually looks like. I suspect it might involve altering our expectations of what *we* will look like on the *other side* of the miracle, when our true "thirst" is finally quenched.

Maybe the miracle, maybe the "water" God is providing today is the opportunity we have to acknowledge *our* part in the sad story of the Residential Schools. It is true that Lutheran churches did not *run* any of the schools, but neither did we speak out *against* them. So maybe the miracle is that we can confess that fact; that we can "own" our failure.

Maybe the miracle is that there *were* survivors of those schools. Maybe the miracle is that those survivors are willing to share their stories, and dive into their pain again, and invite us to take up our responsibility.

Maybe the miracle, maybe the "water" that God is giving us today, is the possibility of making that difficult, painful journey toward reconciliation.

Maybe the miracle, maybe the "water" for today is that the church can grow into a new way of being church, which depend less on finances and structures and numbers, and is defined more by *relationships* and *compassion* and *solidarity* with those who are working for justice.

Let's be honest - understanding "miracle" in this new way, *won't* be easy!

Looking for *these* kinds of miracles, *won't* be easy.

Learning that it's not Moses fault, or anyone else's, that we are thirsty, *won't* be easy.

Moving beyond desiring quick answers and immediate relief to the hardships and challenges we face, *won't* be easy.

Accepting our responsibility for the racism and cruelty of the Residential schools, *won't* be easy.

Listening to the stories of the victims of those Schools, *won't* be easy.

Learning to be church in a new way, *won't* be easy.

Continuing to journey through the wilderness, *won't* be easy.

But the good news in all of this, is that we've *already started* this journey! And God has proved faithful every step of the way.

Nevertheless, the solving of these problems, the taking care of the thirst brought on by this dryness, is going to take a miracle.

Which might not *look* like a miracle. Or at least, it won't look like the miracle we thought we ordered!

But maybe, when someone writes down the story of *our* journey through this wilderness, they won't have to name this place, "They tested the Lord." Maybe they won't be tempted to re-name this church, "The Lutheran church that questioned whether the Lord was truly with them."

And even if they *do* feel it necessary to rename this place and this church those things, that just might be the miracle we needed, to remind ourselves that God's faithfulness usually comes as a mystery, as a miracle that *doesn't* make things easier or more convenient, but which *does* make things more *real*. Including ourselves.

Even when we're thirsty. Amen.

Prayers of the People

A - Trusting the presence of God with all creation, we offer our prayers for the world God loves, the church God calls, and for all people according to their needs.

[*Short pause*]

A - God of thirst, God of water, your miracles surprise us, catch us off guard, and take us where we did not plan to go. Give us the water need today. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of thirst, God of water, you re-define our understanding of “miracle,” so we learn to trust what you have promised, instead of what we want to do. Set us free from our narrow desires. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of thirst, God of water, you are present in thirsty times. Give us faith in the face of the challenges which confront us, to trust your way of compassion and self-giving love. Liberate us from fear, that we may respond with hope. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of thirst, God of water, your church finds itself on a thirsty wilderness journey, where we do not know the way, where we do not even know where we are headed. Comfort us and guide us, so that we may find sufficient supplies of water for our journey. And refocus our efforts toward **relationships** and **compassion** and **solidarity** with those who are working for justice. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of thirst, God of water, we bring before you those who are thirsty for healing: the children of the schools, the people who now recognize their roll in the this tragedy, and those who did nothing to stop it, as well as those who are ill, or lonely, or dying. We remember especially those we name before you.

[*Long pause*]

God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of thirst, God of water, make us thirst for you. Provide the water we need, and strengthen us for the journey we are facing, trusting in your gracious guidance. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.