

### **“Is the Lord among us or not?” – Exodus 17:1-7**

I know it sounds a little “un-churchy”, but are you as tired of parables as I am? When I looked at the readings for today my first reaction was “oh no, another parable – yawn!” There’s nothing wrong with the parable in Matthew’s gospel that we heard read this morning but we’ve been looking at parables for the past few weeks and one more seemed like one too many. I decided to preach on one of the other texts and the one that called out, “pick me!” was the reading from Exodus.

I think the main reason this text appealed so instantly to me was that it describes a few of the issues that the people of Israel had on their journey escaping out of Egypt towards the promised land. With our own journey into the wilderness almost two years now this biblical saga – and the one involving Abraham and that whole gang – comes more and more frequently to my mind.

In a somewhat familiar way this text from Exodus brings to us an episode in which Moses strikes a rock and water gushes forth – kind of an early biblical fracking. Interestingly enough this is one of three such episodes in the Old Testament; the first is in Exodus 15 and the last is in Numbers 20. Today’s reading is the middle one. While there is no definite proof it is quite probable that these are three accounts of one single incident; however, they escalate in complexity and length, offering a possibility that transgression – falling away from the Lord – was an ever-increasing problem on the journey.

Whatever differences these three accounts may have, they share a common theme, namely the involvement and activity of God in the lives of people of faith. What is most important for us is the realization that God is active and supportive even when the faith of people is less than perfect – when they are disbelieving and rebelling, even.

Let’s recall how this event came about and see if it resonates with our own lives. You’ll probably remember that the Exodus, the escaping from Egypt, is the defining moment for the Jewish faith, the key incident in their history that is celebrated annually at the Passover. Those refugees who had broken free from bondage in Egypt – with the help of and by the hand of God – were now suffering the letdown after the adrenaline rush of escaping. Wandering in the wilderness began more and more to seem like perhaps not quite the kind of life they expected to find with their new freedom. The journey was long and hard and presented great challenges, including physical discomfort, lots of walking, hostile people, and the basics of hunger and thirst.

Immediately preceding the incident we are looking at today, if you recall from last week’s Old Testament reading, was the ‘manna from heaven’ incident in which God answered the cries of hunger from the people by delivering a substance “like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.” Naturally, understanding this food to be a gift from God, rules were quickly developed that they were to put an omer of the manna into a jar so that this manifestation of grace could be displayed to all generations. And should these subsequent generations not know what an omer is, the text also helpfully explains that an omer is a tenth of an ephah ... whatever an ephah is!

And so we come to the incident we are examining today. In their journey through the wilderness the newly-formed people of Israel camped at various places – images of the Rohingya refugees fleeing into Pakistan come to mind, as the Israelites had fled Egypt pretty much with only the clothes on their backs, and since they were not people of wealth we could likely assume that they had acquired their camping gear and other personal effects in much the same way as the street people here

today do. It's little wonder that as refugees they were turned away by many if not most of the various kingdoms they encountered on their trek.

But I digress ... here the people are camped at a place called Rephidim, a place lost to history even though the name remains. We aren't told why they chose that spot, but we do hear that it wasn't the best of choices because there was no water there. In the previous version earlier in the Book of Exodus there was water but it was bitter and Moses cured it with a tree to which God pointed him. In this version there is no such tree, but there is the usual mumbling and grumbling and grouching by the people. As usual they blamed Moses and demanded that he do something about it by giving them something to drink. Moses challenges them back asking why they are "putting the Lord to the test." He recognized that the people, who had been directed through and were living by the Lord, saw the lack of water as a sign that Moses no longer had God's favour or at least that he was losing it. And so Moses challenged them that they were losing faith not just in him but in God.

The people, however, didn't want preaching – they wanted water, and so the grumbling got nasty, demanding to know why Moses had led them into such a hostile environment, even a lethal environment where they and their children and livestock would surely perish. It was a tense moment! It was tense enough that even Moses' faith was shaken (although not as much as in the description in Numbers) and he cried to the Lord "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." Stoning was a common enough event and was a manifestation of mob rule and rioting, and a clear indication here that the people were falling away from obedience to the Lord.

This is where the fracking part comes in, as Moses is instructed by God to take the rod that he used to strike the Nile and to bash the rock, which then gushed forth water in abundance and quelled both the thirst and the hot tempers of the assembled people. The question which the people had more and more loudly been asking, namely "is the Lord among us or not?" was clearly answered in this life-giving gift of water with a resounding "Yes, He is." Interestingly enough the names ascribed to the place reflect the grumbling and contention, but by implication – and through the survival of both the people and the telling of the incident – the saving action of God also remains named.

It's kind of fun to look back through the eyes of the writers of the Old Testament and observe how the people came to understand that God was indeed with them, and providing for them, and taking care of them, and loving them even as they behaved like ordinary people – fearful, challenging, often demanding, quarrelsome, and capricious. With the insulation of many centuries and cultural differences we are comfortable watching these ancient people of God struggle with their faith and feel somehow a wee bit smug that we don't exhibit the same characteristics. And that sense of insulation and isolation is the very reason that God has through gifted writers and those willing to sacrifice themselves preserved these stories of developing understanding and brought them to us in the form of our scriptures.

It is precisely because we too call ourselves people of God that we need to be reminded just how like all the people of God we are. It is through the strength of being reminded that just as God was with them in their times of stress and distress and trouble, God is also with us in our challenging times. And when we're really honest with ourselves we can admit that there are times when our faith wavers, when even if we don't voice the thought aloud we nevertheless wonder if God really is there with us. Those are the moments when we need to hear the old stories, to be reminded of the timeless and tireless love of God, to be reassured that God will meet our needs. Not always will our needs be

met in such obvious ways as the gushing forth of water from a rock, and there are and will be times when we need to wait patiently and then look back to say, “aha, so that’s how God helped me!” However, the message is sure and comforting that just as God continued to provide for the people in the trek through the wilderness – even in the face of their continual whining and complaining and demanding and bouts of lack of faith – even through all of that, God met their needs and delivered them.

Of course the connection between the wilderness they wandered through and the wilderness through which we are travelling in our redevelopment is fairly obvious. We are still heading into unknown places, uncharted waters, and the insecurity generated by such a journey is indeed a bit frightening. My reassurance comes from a firm belief that God has not brought us this far only to see us fail dramatically. What we are doing with God’s help is a testament to God’s goodness and grace in Christ and I cannot believe He would set up a situation where all that could be ridiculed. Affirmation of this came as recently as Friday morning as many people at the Seniors Round Table Planning Group approached me to say how excited they are about our project and how great it is for the community and offering whatever help we need.

But there are other wildernesses we will all wander through as well – places of health challenges, family disruptions, grief at relatives and friends whom we have lost ... the list is almost endless. It is important to remember that as we journey through those personal wildernesses although we often feel terribly alone, we are both accompanied by “a great cloud of witnesses” and by God himself. Even, or especially, when we feel like we cannot see God in the events that threaten to swallow us, we can be reassured that Christ walks with us. God has not only provided for his people throughout the ages, in Christ he has experienced what we experience and provides his peace and strength and comfort and salvation to us still.

It is now our turn to join with the uncounted millions who in faith to God and in faith to God in Christ and respond to the question the people posed at Massah and Meribah, “is the Lord among us or not?” with a resounding “Yes, He is!” and to endorse and underscore that answer by demonstrating the comfort of our faith to others, that they may find the same peace we have found. Thanks be to God for this opportunity!