

Strike A Rock

March 15, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11

A homily for a virtual Morning Prayer at St. Mark's, Austin by the Rev. Zac Koons

In Exodus 17 the Israelites are in the wilderness, in scary and uncharted territory, trying to make their way forward in circumstances they can't have predicted—just three chapters ago they walked through the middle of the Red Sea. Now, they stop for a moment in this wilderness, look around, and realize they don't have enough to survive. So what do they do? They rush to the grocery store. By which I mean, they start freaking out.

Now, on the one hand, their fear in this case seems completely reasonable. Water is kind of, well, totally essential. If you don't have it, it kind of *is* worth freaking out about. But on the other hand the story changes if you zoom out just a little and realize that literally one chapter ago they were in the exact same situation—in the wilderness with no water—and what did God do? God miraculously gave them water. That was ONE CHAPTER AGO. Their panic and anxiety has temporarily kept them from remembering the single most important part of being an Israelite, it has kept them from remembering the founding and defining feature of their identity as a nation: that God is always with them.

What a beautiful word for a day like today. We are Israel in the wilderness. Look around. We must not forget. We must not allow the anxiety of our current moment to make us forget all the many and beautiful things God has done for us already in the past. God remains with us, even in uncertain times. It's not to say that there aren't reasonable reasons to be concerned about what's happening in our world. But it's that no matter what is happening in our world, God remains with us, perhaps especially in uncertain times.

The lesson Israel learns in this story is that God might just continue show up in places they don't expect. God showed up for Israel literally from a rock. Surely it's the last place Israel would have expected for God to show up. But it was right in front of them. I wonder what's right in front of you.

This story of Israel in the wilderness is, after all, the Gospel in miniature. Humanity was lost in the wilderness. The last place they expected to find God was in a poor, itinerant Nazarean. The least likely source of their deliverance was the execution of a common, blaspheming criminal on a cross. But it was precisely from that rock, the rock of Christ, with the new rod of the cross, where a lost humanity found the water of new life bursting forth.

All of **this** is an adjustment for us. We are taught as Episcopalians that one place we can count on meeting God week after week, no matter what is going on in the outside world, is in church; and specifically is in the Eucharistic meal. It's a sad thing for us to not share bread and wine at this time. But one thing we must remember on a day like today is that we don't cease to be the church just because we're not in the same building this morning.

I believe this can also be an Israel in the wilderness moment for us. I believe it can be a water from the rock moment for us. I believe this can be a Gospel moment. I genuinely and deeply believe this could be a moment in many of our own lives where we discover God in new and more powerful ways than we ever before imagined were possible. God is with us—and there is nothing that we can do about it. We may just need to look for him in new ways.

And that doesn't mean looking for God alone. Just because it's best that we not be physically together for this season doesn't mean that any of us have to face whatever is coming alone. We will walk together through whatever comes. Later today we'll announce some of our concrete plans for how we hope to face the coming months together, which will include special plans for how to care for those in our community that are more statistically vulnerable to COVID-19, not just those who are further on in years but also including those in our community who are health care workers. From the very first moment of God creating humanity, God saw that it is not good for us to be alone. And we plan to make sure no one in our community is alone in the coming weeks.

In closing, listen to the words of St. Paul: *Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.* Amidst all the uncertainty in the world, don't forget that the most important thing that's happened in the history of the world happened 2,000 years ago—Jesus died for our sins and was raised to new life defeating death forever. Because that happened, we have nothing to fear, even from death. And because that happened, we stand in grace. It's not something we have to chase after. It is something that we exist inside of. Grace is the solid bedrock of our being.

Paul goes on: *And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.* All indications point to the fact that this disease is going to get worse before it gets better. We are still in the early days of the wilderness. But in the community of the church, because God in Christ has defeated death, suffering in the Church can't ever ultimately have a bad ending. It may get bad. But we know how the story ends. Suffering produces endurance; endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. God's love has been poured into your heart through the Holy Spirit give to you. Wherever you are right now, you have everything you need to follow God, to be God's companion, to stand in grace. You still have the Church. We still have one another. We may not have the bread today, but we still have the body of Christ. That is the most precious gift of all.

In the meantime, be on the lookout for rocks to strike. God is closer to you than you think.

Amen.