

The Water of Life
Exodus 17:1-7
September 27, 2020

There have been many warnings over the past decade that our water sources are threatened. Flint Michigan is one noticeable example. Contaminated water can bring dire consequences for a city. Fresh water is such a marvelous gift that we enjoy in Canada. Industry mismanagement of waste, drought, poor management of land, can create disasters for the human and animal population. A few years ago in San Paulo, one of the largest cities in South America, the drought lasted over nine months. Imagine 20 million people without sufficient water to drink, to wash, and to enable businesses to continue. California has seen both extensive droughts and has had the terrible result of deadly wild fires over the past few years. Water is becoming, like oil, a commodity that, in years to come, nations will fight for. Water provides life to the human family and to animals and the earth's vegetation. It is the water of life.

Israel has left the green fertile Nile delta for the brown, sandy wastes of the wilderness of Sinai. It's a hot place to spend time, never mind trekking across it carrying all you own on your back or pulled along on wagons. In summer it can reach over 100 degrees. In that heat one can last perhaps a week without water. So, we can understand why the people feel close to death and express their fear and anger to Moses. They say to Moses: *Give us water to drink.*

This seems to be a common theme of these wilderness wanderings. Moses has twice had to call on God to silence the complaining of the people he is leading to the Promised Land. Just three days from the miracle of the Reed Sea they were thirsty and called on Moses to do something about it. God provided another miracle and the waters at Marah became sweet to drink. Once out in the wilderness for several weeks they again were complaining about their thirst. In Egypt there had been lots of water. After all they lived in the rich, fertile delta of the Nile where water was abundant. Out there in the dry, scorched, treeless wasteland of the Sinai desert there was little water available. So yes, their demands seem reasonable. After all Moses is leading them along this path? Or more to the point, it is God who is leading them through Moses. So why has God chosen this path through the

fiery desert? After all they were promised a green and fertile land, “flowing with milk and honey”, but all they see is a brown landscape of sand, wind, and rocks.

Moses reminds them that their complaint is not against him but against God. Why do you test God? In the parallel account in Numbers 20 we are given a much more extensive account of Moses intercession with God on the people’s behalf. In Numbers we are told that Moses and Aaron retreated to the tent of meeting and fell on their faces in prayer. God’s glory appeared to them as they lay at the entrance to the tent. In Exodus we are told how desperate Moses feels about the responsibility God has put on him. He feels threatened by the people who are so angry that they might stone him to death. God tells Moses to go ahead of the people but take some of the elders of Israel as witnesses. Take your staff that opened the Reed Sea and strike the rock. Out of the rock will flow fresh water. Moses did and water gushed out of it, which satisfied the thirst of the people. Moses named the place: cool waters. No, he called it Massah and Meribah, or testing place and quarreling place.

Just as an aside, notice how Numbers describes what happened at the rock. Moses is so angry at the people he says: *Listen you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of the rock?* And in his anger, he strikes the rock, not once as instructed, but twice. Indeed, in the parallel account in Numbers 20 Moses is told just to command the rock to yield its water, not strike it at all. And because of that anger Moses is told that his failure to “trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites” (Numbers 20:12ff) has barred him from entering the Promised Land.

What does this rock mean? In various places throughout the preaching and teaching of the Apostles we are told that Christ is the rock. Peter says: *This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’* (Acts 4:11) Paul says that it is symbolic of Christ (1Cor 10:4). Like the Israelites, he teaches, we are baptized into Christ, not Moses. We observe communion by eating the spiritual food of Christ’s body, rather than Manna. We drink the spiritual drink of his life-blood instead of the water from the rock.

At the heart of the N.T. water is a powerful symbol of spiritual life. In our John reading the Feast of Booths is taking place in Jerusalem. It was like a harvest celebration and it lasted for seven or eight days.

Each day the priest would draw water from the pool of Siloam in a golden flagon and process with it down through the water gate in Jerusalem and up to the temple. There he would pour the water over the altar. The water symbolized the hope that rain would come for next year's harvest. It also symbolized the Holy Spirit. On the last day of the feast Jesus came incognito. Everyone is asking where he is as the authorities have promised to kill him if he appears.

He cries out: *Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'*

Cool, clear water; remember that best selling song of the 50's.

*All day I face
the barren waste
without the taste of water,
cool water
Old Dan and I
with throats burned dry
and souls that cry
for water,
cool, clear, water*

And in the chorus we sing:

*Dan can you see that big, green tree
where the water's running free
and it's waiting there for you and me,
water, cool, clear, water*

Frankie Lane took it to number two on the British charts in 1955. I doubt that the image of poor Israel in the desert was in the minds of the writers of the song. But I couldn't help thinking about Israel when the song came into my head as I wrote this sermon.

As we have seen, Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that it was really a spiritual rock they drank from that day at Massah. The rock, he tells us, was Christ. He is the living water that flows from God. He gives life just like cool, clear water does to thirsty. But this water he gives is spiritual vitality. A relationship with him brings something alive in us that has been dead. He revives our soul. He changes us on the inside. He transforms our lives with his spiritual healing.

But we have to drink! It only has efficacy if we drink! Remember what Jesus said to the woman he met at the well? She is confused when he asks her for a drink. He responds: If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you, you would be asking him for the living water he offers. He goes on to tell her that the water from this well is good but it doesn't satisfy our deep thirst. You get thirsty again after you drink the well water. But the water Jesus offers, he says, *will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. (John 4:14)*

He is truly the water of life for the human family. I wonder if you and me have drunk from that source in our attempts to quench that inner thirst we feel itching away inside us? I wonder if we have been digging for water at the wrong place? And all the time it's been there right in front of us, this great big rock out of which flows living, fresh water. All that was needed was someone to strike the rock. On the cross Jesus was struck dead for us and out of his death and resurrection flows abundant streams of spiritual life for you and me and for the whole world.

Amen