

"Tapped Out"

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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. ² The people quarreled 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?" ³ 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?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

(Exodus 17:1-7)

In early middle school, I had the ultimate camping experience. I am not talking some great weekend in the woods, with a tent set up by the lake, a perfectly built fire flickering in the moonlight. No, I am talking about a primitive camping experience. I had learned about this camp that was just outside of Boone, North Carolina, and one look at the brochure and I knew I had to go. It was a primitive camp, legitimately run by a man named Hawk; the kind in which you had to build your own teepee before you could sleep that first night. We caught all of our food and had to carve our own utensils. We learned to make fire without the help of matches or flint, and we basically lived off the grid for the three weeks that we were there. Part of the experience there was that each morning Hawk woke us up playing a pan-flute, to get up at sunrise to do what was called "morning watch." We would get up and silently hike around various parts of the wilderness where the camp was located. We would find a place to sit and reflect and watch the sun come up. It was a marvelous experience, to watch the skies shift in glowing colors, to hear the birds start singing their morning songs, and to feel all of creation stretching as the world woke up. I could always tell when we were about halfway through with morning watch because my stomach would start its rumblings. That was always the challenge, how to remain focused and centered and peaceful with a grumbling stomach.

Now I recognize the difference between my camping story and our story today from Exodus. I was only in the woods for about an hour. I also knew that there was bowl of bland oatmeal waiting for me at the end of that time, so I could handle some tummy groans for a little while. But it almost seems like déjà vu with the Israelites. Just last week we heard a very similar story read, part of the narrative of the Israelites in the wilderness. Last week we heard that they were wandering in the wilderness, complaining of hunger and fearful that they would die. They were starting to turn on Moses and Aaron, saying that they should have just stayed behind in Egypt



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rather than die of hunger out in the wilderness. Moses, ever the faithful leader, assured them that not only was the Lord with them, but the Lord would provide for all of their needs. And that is just what happened, the Lord sent quail to their camp that very evening and rained down their daily bread, manna for them to eat.

And here we are again with the Israelites. They've continued on in their journey through the wilderness and the complaining starts again, this time of thirst. Again they turn on Moses, asking why he brought them out of Egypt only to let them die of thirst. But Moses is a step ahead of them this time, turning the question on them. "Why do you test the Lord?" Moses knows that their complaining and their anger, though directed at him, is not really meant for him. He knows that their problem is not their frustration at their human leaders; their problem is their inadequate faith in God. As one writer put it, "The people think they have a lousy leader; but the truth is that they have a lousy faith."¹ Those are harsh words for a people who have experienced great hardships, and I wonder if we can't commiserate with them. When we find ourselves in places not only unfamiliar and disorienting, but also painful, it makes sense that we might want to go back to better days, even if those days weren't all that 'sunshiny' either.

Remember the backstory that has lead Israel to the wilderness. Remember that they endured generations of slavery under Pharaoh, and Moses lead the Israelites in an uprising out of slavery. Remember that God sent plagues so Pharaoh would be forced to release the Israelites from captivity so that they would be a people, no less than God's people. God intervened on their behalf time and again, until the story of Pharaoh gets its conclusion with Moses parting the Red Sea. It has only been weeks after the Red Sea that the Israelites have forgotten the cruelties of Pharaoh and all of God's deliverance.

But parched mouths give way to a flood of complaints, and though this specifically is Israel's story, it is also the story of human nature. We are quick to forget in crisis that God has saved us in the past and God will do it again in the future, if only we have the courage to leave Egypt and follow. It is the story of the universal church as well and stepping into the future where God is leading in our times can feel like a vastly different wilderness that is departure from the glory days of the mainline church. It's a cultural wilderness where we are uncertain about the church's influence in the world, even questioning if we will survive another 500 years of reformation, as if God was not out in front leading us. We shrug our shoulders and instead of saying, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst," we give it a contemporary twist. "Why did you bring us out of those glory days when we sat in our full pews but instead God has brought us into this wilderness to die by budget and member dehydration."

That might be a bit of an over-exaggeration for sure, but we folks in the church do at times talk as if the best years of the church were behind us, just like the Israelites as if their best years were back in Egypt. It is not hard to look around to see shrinking numbers and find yourself saying things like "remember when it used to be... fill in the blank", and feel like the fruitful, glorious days of the church in our lives and in our culture have passed right before our eyes. As one writer said, "The Christian Church in North America is in the midst of a great change. Our old assumptions simply do not hold up anymore. We know that our way of doing church, of being the body of Christ for the world, is changing, but few of us feel confident enough to predict exactly

¹ Bartlett, David, L. *Feasting on the Word: Year A Additional Essays*. 2011, 4

what the church of the future will look like...The church is dehydrated and needs water immediately.”² The story of the Israelites has become our story.

As a new and free people, the Israelites have to figure out how to thrive in a wilderness where God has placed them and there is no going back. I have sympathy why they might be afraid to let go of Egypt because they do not want to forget their history, who they are, and what they have known. But the good news for us and for the Israelites, though could not see it at the time, is that they did not stumble into this wilderness on their own or by accident. No, it was God who brought them into the wilderness for a reason to find the Promised Land, perhaps even find themselves as a people. Sometimes we have to get a little lost in the wilderness to find ourselves, to find change and growth in faith. Let’s not forget Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness before he started his ministry, and he came out different than when he went in much like the assembly of Israel. Sure the wilderness can be scary and unknown, but it can also teach us, reform us, and help us hear God in new ways. Creative and bold ideas come from the wilderness and in the silence of desert places God’s voice becomes all the clearer. It is here when the Israelites ask quite possibly the most profoundly theological question a person could ask. “Is God among us or not?” We can imagine that these folks asked this question out of despair and anger. This question feels like the fork in the road to a place that leads either to great faith or consuming doubt.

Perhaps you have asked this question before. Currently it doesn’t take much to look around and wonder that question. To see creation groaning with natural disasters that seem to hit one after the other, drowning people’s chance to recover or hope. Is the Lord among us or not? To hear a painful diagnosis of a family member or friend that seems to happen week after week. To face dementia, cancer, depression, whether alone or with family. Is the Lord among us or not? To tread on eggshells when talking with friends and family members because even the lightest comment can become the heaviest political argument. To see insults hurled, breaking down walls of compassion. To see dividing lines growing taller and longer, and to see understanding and listening shrinking and withdrawing. Is the Lord among us or not?

What if that question doesn’t have to feel like a fork in the road? Why does it have to feel like a choice between faith and doubt? Because I don’t think it is possible to speak truly of faith until you have dealt fully with doubt. What if this question were reframed to speak of vision? What if to ask that question meant that we are looking around us and ahead of us in ways that are creative and imaginative? I think this is where my frustration with the Israelites lies. I hear them asking the question as an accusatory declaration to a distant God. But God shows up. God instructs Moses to strike the rock and water flowed out of it like a stream. Again and again God shows up. Water-food-water. This is the third time that sustenance has been miraculously provided by God. Again, I’m frustrated with the Israelites, and then I remember they are human, just like me and like you. What if this question were asked, not with an angry tone, but with a curiosity of how the Lord is doing a new thing?

Earlier this week I was at a presbytery meeting for the Committee on Ministry. This is the committee that regulates church disputes; helps churches transition when they are getting new ministers and all sorts of other things. It was three hour meeting which can leave anyone asking, “Is the Lord among us or not?” The agenda was relatively routine but then we came to a piece of new business. That day, we were to hear and to validate a new ministry. In the past few years the Presbyterian Church (USA) has worked on an initiative called 1,001 New Worshipping Communities which acknowledges that we need to seek new and different ways to worship and

² *ibid.*, 5.

that the traditional view of church as a building with a tall steeple with people meeting on Sunday to worship is starting to seem limited in ways to reach different folks. These communities, though they might not look like our idea of church are united in their mission to form new disciples of Jesus and to impact the world around them. So this leader begins telling us about a new worshipping community happening here in Charlotte. It began as a group of 12 people who gathered in homes to pray together, to tell stories of hope, and to serve in mission together. And it began to grow and grow and grow. Until one member shared that they had a friend who owned a bar who might share the space with them to meet. They reached out and the next week they were invited to meet there for their worship. We heard how the first Sunday of the month they pull tables together into a big long table and bring food to share fellowship and stories of hope they had witnessed that week. On the third Sunday of the month they have what is called Park Bench, where they invite figures to come tell their stories and views and hope for the community, whether they agree or disagree with them. They have welcomed to speak a transgendered person, the police chief, an African American woman raising two young sons, a counselor working with substance abuse, and many more. Around the table, we were swept up in the feeling that this is a vibrant and exciting new ministry, and they are building an authentic community that truly lives out its mission. The leader was invited to leave as we began our time of discernment before voting to validate this ministry. We all seemed to sit in stunned silence. And then one minister spoke saying, "I worshipped with them a few weeks ago and Jesus was there. And Jesus was there on Friday and Saturday night too with the folks in the bar."

Sometimes the miracles that God provides are so vivid and powerful that you cannot help but feel them long after the miracle has passed. And sometimes, when fear and doubt crowd their way into our hearts and minds, God provides reminders and shows up again and again. It's why we gather around this table, to remember, to eat and to drink when are hungry and thirsty. When the wilderness creeps in, when we feel too tired and parched, when the journey is long, this is the daily bread and the living water to remind us of who and whose we are and to help carry us onward. Thanks be to God for such abundant gifts. Amen.