

The Lord is our Provider (Part 2)

Exodus 17:1-7

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Last week we looked at the 16th chapter of Exodus. The Israelites were very hungry and frightened for their very lives as they thought they would die of starvation. They were challenged in their newly found freedom and though they were delivered out of slavery, they remembered the organization of Egypt and that they were fed while in captivity. Freedom became scary as food was scarce and they just did not know what to do next. To combine the reality of undernourishment with past trauma, there was a seriously anxious feeling among the people. We left off in the text where God promised to provide meat at twilight and bread in the morning.

What we skipped over was that as some people gathered more than others, those who gathered more did not seem to have any abundance and those who gathered little did not go without. The people did not quite trust in the Lord, so on the Sabbath, when they were told to rest and use the double portion from the day prior, they decided they had better continue gathering for fear of running out of food. The manna gathered on the Sabbath grew worms and became foul. Moses offered some corrective education and instructed the Israelites how to gather and prepare in preparation for the Sabbath. At which point, all was well with the food and nothing spoiled. They canned some Manna to show future generations how God provided in the wilderness.

As we enter the 17th chapter of Exodus today, a new story parallels that of the 16th chapter. This time, the people are thirsty. The importance of water is a common biblical theme and underscores the reality of water's importance at all times and places. The Spirit of God hovers over the waters at the dawn of creation. Much of our human bodies are made up of water. Water can save and destroy. Missions all over the world help with the life-changing work of creating systems of clean running water for communities. The flood in the time of Noah wiped out most of the earth's inhabitants. We also note Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. Today's text is of course another memorable moment of water in the biblical narrative. Again, there is conflict between the theology of scarcity and theology of divine provision and abundance. Our contemporary context is not much different. We understand basic human needs that are very real.

We might think of the water crisis in Flint Michigan that impacted so many for such a long period of time. We might also consider the challenges of accessing healthcare and the rising costs of food in our time. We consider the rising homeless populations certainly including homeless veterans. When there is real need and suffering, it is hard to listen to the words, "trust in the Lord." The deeper problem is not complaining but the inability to imagine life apart from Egypt's structures. The wilderness teaches dependence upon God's ongoing provision rather

than imperial systems of control. Freedom into the unknown can be scary after leaving a place of certainty, even if the former place involved being in a state of bondage.

In another parallel to the previous chapter, there is the complaints directed toward Moses verses complaints toward God. Moses again asserts that the complaints are truly toward God. Again, God can handle our complaints. Of course, this time, the pressure is on Moses as he feels his life is in danger as they people are angry. The suspense builds.

Freedom is less predictable and has less control. The people interpret the lack of water as evidence that their future is threatened. Yes, we just saw this play out a chapter ago, when the people were hungry. The reader may begin to expect God to act again. But the people are thirsty. The need is real. Suffering is imminent. Moses is feeling even more threatened this time as he turns to the Lord to cry out, "What shall I do? The people are ready to stone me." God does not punish the people nor Moses for their concerns nor complaints. God instructs Moses as to what to do next. Moses took some elders with him and the staff to which he struck the Nile River in chapter 7 making the water undrinkable for the Egyptians. Moses strikes the rock at Horeb with his staff and the water began flowing so the people could drink. God provides life where it doesn't seem possible. Just as God provided meat and bread through the quail and manna, God provides water at Horeb. As usual, the Lord is our provider.

The central issue is not really water, but whether Israel trusts God's capacity to create abundance in the wilderness. It is a question of God's presence and action in times of suffering and uncertainty.

Congregations often ask the same question in different forms: "Do we have enough, or is this enough?" God often answers with provision rather than explanation. Perhaps we have seen this recently. Can any of us think of an example? Recently, a wise member of our congregation proposed a great question to which I still ponder a good answer. "What does the church need that we don't have the money for." I don't know where this question will lead us, but it is exciting to think of answers. I encourage you to consider this question and feel free to think on a large scale.

Many people choose not to trust God after witnessing horrible suffering. Others come up with different conclusions and find great purpose and meaning in their lives after witnessing similar suffering. The interpretation and theology of life experience is largely up to us. But the important question for today is, do we trust the Lord as our provider? If so, what does that mean as we prepare our budget for next year? What does that mean as we consider how we will manage and provide our time, money, and resources? What do we need? What is in excess of our needs? Furthermore, what is God trusting us to do right now?

Moses calls the place Massah (which means testing) and Meribah (which means quarreling), because the Israelites are testing and quarreling with the Lord asking the question, "Is the Lord with us or not?" Do we really believe the Lord is with us or not? This question is not just a matter of faithfulness. It is right and true that human bodily needs are essential to our spiritual

formation. We are not called to ignore human need and say, "God is good all the time." We need to be real. We need a salvation that includes our holistic needs. We need community that promotes mutual flourishing, that has compassion and empathy and seeks to care for the earth. Stewardship covers all of this. How do we best care for one another and the earth? How do we sense divine presence in the eyes of the needy or in the moments when we care? The Lord is with us when we care. And, in the moment, the Lord is our provider of all that we need.

In our text, God does not provide answers to the theological questions of the people. God provides water. God provides the gift of life when death is imminent. God gives the people grace and meets their needs before they believe and trust. And that is good news, especially on the days it is hardest to trust.