

Water from a rock

Exodus 17:1-7

November 13, 2005

What strange creatures we are!

We are capable of extraordinary acts of generosity and compassion, of setting aside our own needs and wants just to bring some help and happiness into another person's life. And then, in the blink of an eye, we may turn around and whine and moan over some petty slight, or plot revenge against all those people who failed to give us the respect we so richly deserve.

We are capable of creating and appreciating such beauty in music and art and poetry, but much of the sounds and images and language that dominate our cultural landscape is little more than trash.

We can explore the far reaches of our solar system and the intricacies of the human genome, we can bring back species from the brink of extinction and push back diseases to the brink of extinction, but we cannot tame our own willful and wayward spirits.

We are filled with a thirst for God -- we are! At the core of our being is a longing to know God and to be known and be loved by God, but we ignore it. We do little, so very little, to cultivate a real personal relationship with the living God. Whether we call ourselves believers or not, we live as practical atheists, choosing it/doing it/living it on our own.

Pascal was right in his assessment of human beings:

What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe!

We are the glory of the universe ... creatures uniquely bearing a likeness to God, endowed with such great power and such great influence and such great responsibility. We have an enormous capacity for doing good, for finding ways to take care of this earth and to take care of each other and to bring honor to God.

But, at the same time, we are the refuse of the universe ... We have an enormous capacity for doing harm. We wreak havoc with the global climate, we strip the earth of its resources and fill it with toxic wastes, we hurt each other, we kill each other, and we bring shame to the name of God. We know enough to understand the impulses of love and justice and righteousness, but we do not follow them. We are preoccupied with our own needs, our own ambitions, our own distractions. The world can go to hell ... as long as I have enough of what I need to eat and drink and be at least a little bit merry.

The people of Israel arrived in Rephidim after almost three months of marching through the wilderness, and all they could think about was how thirsty they were. *Give us water to drink!*, they said to Moses. They had seen so much of what God had done for them -- bringing them out of Egypt, delivering them from cruel and inhuman bondage, delivering them from Pharaoh's army, providing food for them in the desert. But now because they couldn't find water, they were ready to give up the whole enterprise and to throw stones at their leader.

But don't judge the people of Israel too harshly for their short memories! We do the same. Isn't it true that regardless of sign after sign of the Lord's goodness to us, regardless of year after year of the Lord's faithful provision for our needs, when we encounter a daunting obstacle in our path, we are too often ready to throw in the towel and to stone our leaders?

Perhaps an obstacle like a budget deficit ... For over one hundred and forty-nine years, we have lived with budget deficits and tight finances, but we have always had enough, enough to be a church. God has provided -- to us and through us.

But we have never had a deficit as big as this one . Even a successful stewardship campaign will leave us short. Our costs are too high, we will have to cut back on staff, we will have to cut back on mission, we can't afford to keep doing what we are doing. It just can't be done. We can't support this kind of budget. You can't get blood out of a stone. You can't get water from a rock ...

You can't? God did. God told Moses to strike a rock with his stick. Moses did and water flowed from the rock for the people to drink. The Lord was with them ...

And the Lord is with us! We too are on a journey through the wilderness. Our path is sometimes difficult and perilous and daunting, but it leads to the promised land! We are not just wandering around, spinning our wheels. We are going somewhere! Our future does not hang in the balance. Our future rests in God's hands, and God provides!

We will always have enough, enough to be a church, as long as we choose to be one ... as long as we choose to be one. The key to stewardship of our money is stewardship of our faith. If we believe the Lord is with us, if we believe the Lord will provide, if we know where we are going and are eager to get there, money will never be a problem. We will have more than enough. Of that I am certain. God provides. Put your faith in the God who provides and put your money where your faith is!

I am confident about the future of this congregation. The God who brought water from a rock can breathe new life into us. God can turn shy people into inviters, hesitant people into doers, parsimonious people into generous givers, casual churchgoers into passionate disciples.

That's the key. The key to the future of this congregation is passion. Being passionate is not a style option, as in some Christians are passionate and some aren't. Passion is the substance of our faith. Without passion there is no faith. Without passion there is no church. Being passionate doesn't necessarily mean being emotionally demonstrative -- that is a style-thing, a personality-thing. Being passionate means engaging our whole selves in the enterprise of following Jesus, giving our whole selves -- intellect and emotion and desire and vigor -- to the adventure of following Jesus. You cannot love God with anything less than everything.

But the good news is this: the Lord is with you, and the Lord loves you with nothing less than everything! There is an astonishing detail in this story that is a proof of that love. God says to Moses:

I will stand before you on a rock. I will stand on a rock before the leaders of the people to hear all your complaints, to receive all your accusations, to stand trial on the charge of abandoning you ...

I will stand before you on a rock ... Strike the rock.

We strike at God with our anger, our bitterness, our pettiness, and our faithlessness, and God gives us ... water. God stands on a rock to receive our judgment and offers us grace in return.

Can you think of another occasion when God is lifted up before all the people, receiving their judgment, bearing their punishment, and offering grace in return? We are strange creatures ... wonderfully made and hopelessly lost.

But the Lord made the punishment fall on him, the punishment all of us deserved ...

From the rock flows water. From the rock flows grace. From the rock flows hope. From the rock flows life. God provides ... all that we need.