

# Trinity United Methodist Church

September 13, 2020

Pastor Dan Elmore

## Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7 (NIV)

**1** The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. **2** So they quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?” **3** But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” **4** Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.” **5** The LORD answered Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. **6** I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. **7** And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

## Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

How dare they? He had proven himself before Pharaoh. He had gone to bat for them time after time after time. He saw them through the Red Sea. He was leading them through the wilderness. And now, just like a child who refuses to go to bed, they're thirsty *again*. Have they forgotten about that time already when he made the bitter water sweet, just a short while ago? And yet, we read, they complained. They quarreled. They attacked, again. And this time they even seem to make demands. “Give us water to drink!” And he'd done all of this stuff before already, and it's like they wanted more. More from Moses. “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children”—I mean, throw the *kids* into it now. Not just “us,” but, “why are you doing this to *our children*, Moses? The children! Consider the children! And our livestock, our livelihood. Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make all of us die of thirst?”

Friends, I can tell you that every leader in any kind of ministry, clergy or laity—let's face it, anyone who has served in any kind of leadership capacity, period—can likely empathize with Moses at this juncture, as he then turns from the people to God and says, “What am I to do with these people? They are about ready to stone me.” We're doing all we can do, and the constituents always want more. There is quarreling. There is grumbling, there is complaining, and other stories in the wilderness that we'll get to. There is murmuring. We don't do that in church—*murmur, murmur, murmur, murmur*. Not in the hallways, not in the parking lot. Bishop Pennell always told us to make sure that you always attend the parking lot meeting after the meeting, because that's usually where most of the stuff in the church gets done.

Quarrelling, grumbling, complaining, murmuring—it's what we do. Lest you think that I'm getting some steam off of my chest as a ministry leader, I'm doing the same thing about Bishop Sharma Lewis right now. And if she's watching, she knows it.

I remember very early on in ministry, my friend Carl and I went to Ginghamburg United Methodist Church, where Mike Slaughter was the pastor at the time, and under Mike's leadership over a good 25 if not 30 years, the church grew from a small country church to one of the largest United Methodist churches in the United States. He had a special session for us young clergy leaders, and he was telling us about all the various ministries that they had going and the various building programs that they had done, etc., and my buddy Carl asked him, “How did you get all this done without opposition? Without people complaining and grumbling?” And if you know my buddy Carl, Carl doesn't church things up often. He's a pastor, but he doesn't church things up often. There's another word there that I can't say from the pulpit, but, “how'd you get this done without people doing *that*?” And Mike looked right back at him. And Mike is a pastor who also takes the gloves off sometimes, and he said, “Carl, some people are always going to find *something* to \*complain\* about.”

There's a story I came across of a woman in a small English town who was known to always have something to complain about. It got on everybody's nerves. Finally, the vicar in the town, the pastor, thought, “Aha! I finally found something about which she can't complain.” He noticed that her crop of potatoes that year was especially wonderful. It was a wonderful crop. So he came across her in the town and said, “My! Even you can't complain about these! Everyone in town is saying how wonderful your potatoes are this year!” And she looked at him with a side-eye and said, “Yeah, they're not bad. But where are the bad ones to feed to the pigs, now?” *A/ways* something to complain about.

And complaining is especially something that we do in the wilderness times. Times that we described last week as desolate, as dry, as lonely, as difficult, as agonizing. Times in which we often hurt. Those who don't believe in God might think of

times like these only in secular terms, as depression and grief and loss and pandemic. And we can certainly hold on to those terms as well. But we who *do* believe in God, we who follow Jesus, we also are always to be asking, “Where is God in this? Where is God in this time of wilderness?” And especially in these times of wilderness that we find to be a time of challenge. Sometimes it challenges us to our very core.

Perhaps we might hear the question that Moses asks the people: “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?”

Did you ever notice, particularly with kids—somebody was sharing about this recently with me—that they might lash out against you as a parent or grandparent or teacher, and instantly you know deep down inside that it’s not really you that they’re directing their anger at. When they make comments, exclamations like “I don’t love you!” Or even, “I hate you!” It can still hurt, but really it’s misplaced. And we’re the lucky ones that get to catch it.

And friends, this happens all the more in church. In communities of faith. That when we find that people are angry at other people in the church, or other people in general, when we find that we’re angry with each other, when we find that we’re angry with leadership...maybe we’re actually angry at God. Especially when the wilderness presents such deep challenges to us. These challenges that expose us, that magnifying glass shines down on us and exposes deep secrets within us that our anger masks so that it doesn’t dare get out for other people to know, or it would cripple us, we think, if other people were to know. Times that expose deep, deep wounds within us, especially from our past and our families of origin. Times that expose our deep and darkest sins, either those that we have committed or those that have been committed against us.

And so really, Moses puts his finger right on it when he asks, “Why do you put the LORD to the test?” There are plenty of instances throughout this narrative of the Lord putting the Lord’s people to the test. Yet we’re not to put God to the test. Jesus even quotes that scripture in His own testing in the wilderness. And if you look at the Hebrew of that word—what do we do when we “test” somebody? We’re back to school now. What do we do when we test students? We’re testing to see if they know what we’ve taught them. Right? We’re testing to see if they know how they’re supposed to fit into whatever box we want to put them in. And so when God tests us, He’s testing to see if we’re becoming the people He wants us to be. But on the flip side, if we get to testing God, what are we doing? We’re trying to get God to become the God we want Him to be, according to our standards and not God’s.

Let’s get honest. How many times have we prayed for something like, “Lord, make me more generous.” And we mean all well and good when we pray that prayer, but when the opportunity comes to practice generosity, what’s the footnote we add to

that prayer? “Oh, but not *too* generous, now.” I don’t know how many times I’ve heard it said, “Do not pray to God for patience, because God will give you opportunity to practice patience.” And maybe we don’t actually want to be *that* patient.

How many times have we prayed for God to “heal our land” here lately? To heal us from this disease? And those are perfectly legitimate prayers that I have prayed as well. But how many times have we really *meant*, “Lord, let us go back to the way it was.” Even in that, why are we putting God to the test? Why are we trying to fit God into our little boxes?

Last week I talked about how wilderness is a time for learning, also. And so maybe God has no interest in being put into those boxes. Maybe God has something greater for us to learn through these wilderness experiences. Maybe God is even seeking to strip away everything we’ve added to our faith, to get us back to the essentials. Maybe God is seeking to humble us. And friends, I don’t know about you, but that’s scary. Something like that means that I could be out of a job, if God is really trying to teach us a new way to do church, even.

Journeying through times of wilderness challenges like we’re currently facing can be scary, unnerving, unsettling, discouraging, and seemingly unending, so that it is so easy and human nature to be like the Israelites and ask, “Why? Why have you brought me into this, God? Just to make me lonely, desolate, angry, discouraged?”

The good news, friends, is that even in the midst of whatever complaining we might do, God still provides. The Lord answered Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.

Even in the midst of our complaining, in the midst of our grumbling, even in the midst of our murmuring, God is still gracious. God is still slow to anger. God is still providing. And God is still a God of undeserved grace.

I went to Wesley Theological Seminary. Wesley is real big into Religion and the Arts. As such, there are many art installations across campus there in Washington, D.C. And over in the corner of the courtyard is a statue of this very story from scripture. Of Moses striking the rock with his staff. And in the warmer months when the pipes don’t freeze up, they turn the fountain on within it and water actually comes out from the rock into a little pool there in the statue. Wesley employs an artist in residence on a yearly basis, and down Massachusetts Avenue from Wesley is a large Jewish synagogue. And this congregation actually commissioned the artist in residence to design a sculpture for the synagogue. Didn’t give him any instruction of what to do, just, “Pick something from

our history as the Jewish people and make that a piece of art.” And so this is the artist’s choice, focusing on how God provided out of seemingly impossible circumstances; literally, water from a rock. And when the artist presented the statue to the congregation, they said, “Sorry. We don’t want it.” He said, “What do you mean?” They said, “We’ll pay you to do something else, but not this, because this reminds us of that time when we grumbled and we complained against God. It reminds us of a time when we didn’t exactly get it right. It reminds us of a time when they actually called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’”

It would be like today, driving through northern Virginia and winding up over by Mount Vernon, right? “Oh yeah, that’s the place where George and Martha Washington live. Yeah, George was our first President. We’re proud of a place like that.” Right? This would be like going back through this area of the wilderness and every time, being reminded, “Oh yeah. That’s the place where we screwed up. But that’s also the place where God was gracious to us.”

I think that’s often, when we grumble, when we quarrel, when we complain, what lies in the deepest parts of our core of faith. “Is the Lord really among us or not?” It reminds me of times of untimely deaths in particular. In times of other deaths as well, where a member of the family will come up and ask me, “Was the deceased saved or not?” And I have come to find in my years of ministry—still have a long time to learn yet, but I’ve come to learn so far—that really what those people are most concerned about, when they’re confronted especially with an untimely death, when they’re confronted with the preciousness and fragility of life, they’re really asking: “Am I saved or not? Is the Lord with me or not?” And friends, that’s a question we can only answer for ourselves.

And so in the midst of challenge, when we are tempted to grumble and quarrel and complain and murmur, let’s ask ourselves the deeper questions, those adaptive questions, and discern: “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Thanks be to God. Amen.