

“Jeopardy!”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 25, 2011

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Scriptures: Exodus 17: 1-7; Philippians 2: 1-13

Exodus 17:1-7

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

Philippians 2:1-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human

likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Worship Resources

Invitation to Communion

“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. 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.” (Exodus 17: 5-6)

In the sight of the elders we gather around this Lord’s Table. Here, in the sight of our elders, we are welcomed in the name of Jesus Christ. Here at the Lord’s Table our elders pray for the elements and for our very souls. Here the Lord provides so that the people of God may drink and be refreshed, and may eat and be sustained.

Benediction

The Scriptures tell us that “the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded.” (Exodus 17: 1) We, too, journey by stages, as the Lord commands us. Go forth, confident and content, knowing that God is with you in every stage of life, in every step you take, and in every encounter. And the whole people of God said, “**Amen!**”

Sermon:

One night a couple was in a horse drawn carriage along a quiet road in the country.

Out of the dark a man's voice is heard.

"Mabel, will you marry me?"

Immediately she responds, *"Yes, Horace, I will!"*

There is a long silence.

Out of the dark we hear Mabel ask, *"Why don't you say something?"*

Horace says, *"I am afraid I have said too much already."*

A crisis of faith can emerge slowly, growing over time, or quickly, in an instant.

When was your most recent crisis of faith?

What did you not have that you needed?

What was lacking?

How did you feel?

Were you calm, cool and collected, or did you feel angry?

Did you sense a deep need to panic?

Did you want to blame someone?

In times of crisis, we do get upset.

When your children do not have water to drink, you will be upset.

Last week DeKalb County employees were working on the water main near our home,

so they shut off the water for several hours.

Sure, life was different for a bit,

and we were reminded how much we rely on fresh water from taps and toilets,

yet we knew the stoppage was short lived.

Imagine our neighbors in East Texas whose farm cattle have no water,

and the ranchers who have to decide

which treatments are most humane for their herds.

Imagine our neighbors in East Africa where entire nations have no water,

and families are moving, walking, journeying countless miles

in search of sustenance, living on hope and a prayer.

When your farm has no water, you will be upset.

When your family has no water, you will be upset.

When you raise your voice and express your concerns,

your complaint is valid.

Yours would be a legitimate expression of angst.

So, too, are the voices in the Bible that we hear today as if for the first time.

The Holy Bible describes an unpleasant experience during the Exodus.

“They camped at Rephidim,

but there was no water for the people to drink.

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?’” (Exodus 17: 1b-2)

Here they were, miles from their homes, having fled Egypt

to leave enslavement and go in search for the Promised Land.

They would wander and wonder across the wilderness

for two generations, for 40 years.

The myth is that they wandered for 40 years

because their leader Moses, being a man, refused to ask for directions.

Closer to the truth is that they were probably waiting

for a new generation to be born and raised who did not know slavery,

who would have a fresh face and new hope in the new land.

Even so, as they moved and journeyed in stages as the Lord commanded them,

they grew hungry.

The Lord provided manna.

They grew sunburned in the day and cold at night,

and the Lord provided a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

And when the water ran out, they grew thirsty.

And once again, they were face to face with a crisis of faith.

I say a crisis of faith

because when their water skins ran dry so, too, did their trust in God.

What do you do when you are having a crisis?

Without judgment, based on 26 years of pastoral experience and perceptions,

here are some ways I have seen you and me respond.

Some folks hit a crisis and decide to set up a tent and camp there for a bit.

Some folks actually enjoy complaining;

they find meaning in misery;

their hurt becomes their identity.

A classic response is to either fight, flight, or freeze.

Do you fight?

Is it easier to argue and quarrel than to seek solutions?

Do you take flight?

Change friends, change churches, change directions?

Or do you freeze, stagnate,

pull down the blinds and pull up the covers over your head?

Do you grasp at straws, seeking, searching for any help in a storm,

or do you find yourself becoming a grouch, gripping at whoever is in your way?

Here for our spiritual benefit is an example of how to cope.

Here is what happens in the Bible.

The whole people of God 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?”

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?”

Does this sound familiar?

When was the last time we quarreled with our leaders,

or with those we appointed or elected to lead us?

Moses cried out to the LORD,

“What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

You can see his frustration.

Moses has a decision to make.

Moses was having his own crisis of faith.

He could be a part of the problem or a part of the solution.

When I was in seminary my roommate left me a note on our dorm door.

I answered his question by writing,

“John Lennon said that there are no problems, only solutions.”

Later I found that he scribbled next to it,

“If I had John Lennon’s money, I wouldn’t have any problems either.”

The Biblical solution to crises of faith,

crises of community concerns and personal challenges

is to go to the Lord.

Go to the Lord.

Moses does just that.

He turns to the Lord for guidance and direction...and then he obeys.

Many of us ask for prayers of discernment and guidance.

Excellent! Keep it up!

Discernment is a very fine first step.

The next step is critical, central, even crucial to solving a crisis of faith.

Obey.

Follow through.

Do what the Holy Spirit tells you to do.

Trust in the Lord to provide and guide you through your life.

Paul encourages us to “*work out your own salvation*

with fear and trembling.” (Phil. 2:
12)

Grapple, discern, obey, act upon, and then share.

Include one another in both the solutions and the blessings.

Furthermore, Moses did not run and hide.

The Lord commanded him to stand in front of the people.

I read into this instruction

that Moses was to love the same people who quarreled with him.

Takes a lot of love and courage to stand up to and with those

who have just said all kinds of unkind things

about your ancestors and your integrity and your God,

yet that is exactly what Moses did.

This is a mark of a faithful servant leader:

one who loves people even when they are not very loveable.

Finally, he did not act in isolation.

He served and led and acted in concert with the elders and the community of faith.

He trusted in the collective wisdom of the spiritual leaders,

those who had been around the block a few times,

those whose corners were honed,

those who might not always agree

yet would unite to serve and break bread together.

Now, folks, here is where we step through the looking glass;

here is the point in the story when Alice goes down the rabbit hole.

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.

God did (at least) two remarkable, unbelievable actions.

God did an act of grace for a people in crisis

to pull them out of their crisis...

even though they did not profess belief,

did not trust, did not behave very loving or
loveable,

nor did they make any promises

to change or tithe or be
good,

to save the world or
share the water.

This is the amazing grace of God.

You can't make this stuff up!

The Lord provides no matter what.

No...matter...what.

And in order for this to happen,

God said they should hit a rock with a stick, and then water would pour out.

They did, and it did.

Miracle of miracles, crisis averted! people saved! livestock refreshed!

community is healed! trust in leadership and Lord restored!

All it took was obedience.

Trust and obey.

Have faith and follow through.

You know, something tells me that

there are rocks in our midst that need to be tapped.

Who needs Living Water?

The lost, the least, the last, the unloved or seemingly unlovable.

Hardened hearts and minds and souls.

Folks whose faith and hope and world vision

have dried up and shrunk and turned inward.

Folks going through a crisis of faith,

families and cities and nations in jeopardy,

and Jesus Christ wants, needs, prays for, calls to
Him

someone to step up and reach out,

to trust and obey and do the will

of the One who created and
creates.

My friends, whose soul do you need to reach out to?

Who needs your help with their crisis of faith?

You and the eldership and the Lord together can do this.

Think about how someone helped you in your crisis of faith.

Someone listened, asked questions, prayed with you, followed
through.

Remember what was most helpful?

Do you think you can do that? be that? be there for your neighbor in need?

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who have faith in you. Amen!