



“Dying of Thirst”

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Scripture (NRSV):

Exodus 17:1-7

1 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?"

Sermon:

Claude Piantadosi wrote a book called, “The Biology of Human Survival, Life and Death in Extreme Environments”. A biblical commentator took his calculations about human survival without water, and did the math, and came to the chilling realization that in the hottest months of the year in the Sinai Peninsula, with temperatures soaring as high as 120

degrees Fahrenheit, a person, marching for a single day without water, could literally die of thirst.

Normally, it takes days to die of thirst, up to 100 hours. But not under those extreme conditions, the very conditions that are the reality of this story we heard today.

This isn't a whiney bunch of brats...these are people, on the run from their enemies, being pushed to death's door by their running, carrying the children and pushing the elders along, driving their herds of goats and sheep. In blistering heat. Without water.

Dying of thirst.

There is pain, and hallucination, there is crying but your eyes are dry and your voice isn't a wail, it's a croak. It is a terrible way to die. No parent wants to see their child die, let alone die in this way.

No children want to see their beloved elder parents go this way.

No herder wants to lose their flocks in such a horrible manner.

Yet, this is what they were up against.

So yes, they were gonna complain. They were desperate to survive.

You would complain too, admit it.

And Moses, Moses has to "go on ahead of the people" (vs. 5); some Hebrew scholars say the better translation is that Moses "must go before them all", or he "goes in front of them all", and he cannot fail to see their suffering.

Nor does Moses go alone. The other leaders, those with the strongest stomachs and the most determined or compassionate hearts...those "elders of Israel" (vs. 5), also go ahead with Moses. They see it all, and they go with Moses, and they face it all with him.

The suffering of the people and the animals, and the threat of death like a plague over them all.

Moses takes his famous stick that began the plagues of God against the Egyptians; the Nile as a river of blood, and flies, and boils, and frogs, to name a few. THAT stick.

And he finds a new use for it...it is no longer the harbinger of death, it is the tool of life.

He strikes the rock with that stick, the water comes forth, and with it comes life.

And Yahweh says, I am there, standing there, right in front of you. I AM LIFE.

These days I just can hardly help myself, but there are days, when I am following the news, that I feel just like someone parched in the desert...all I see around me is death looming, disaster everywhere.

I can hardly believe that we have come so far to freedom, after those halcyon days under the previous president, only to find ourselves stuck in a deadly desert of cruelty, bigotry, violence, arrogance, and despair.

Trapped in a world with the threat of death everywhere we turn our eyes.

We see our children dying, literally, in school shootings and spiritually in waves of suicide.

We see our DACA young people and their dreams dying.

We see Texas and Florida and Louisiana and their cities and homes, and the territory of Puerto Rico; dying, dying of thirst. There is no water, no power, no food, no help.

Well, except that isn't true, help does come. Maybe it comes late, and maybe it comes begrudgingly, after the pressure of society pushes hard against this current leader and his administration...but it does come.

They are in a desert and yet God sits among the rocks and says, I AM LIFE.

And amazingly, life shows up.

The countless stories of life saving, and of helping, and healing; they don't make the news.

But they are there. Saving people and saving pets, right?

Salvaging homes and hopes. Thousands of acts of mercy and courage, compassion and friendship among strangers.

There, in the midst of the horror, is God, saying, I AM LIFE.

Perhaps God is not easy to see. Those Israelites were dying, maybe the weakest babies and the frailest elders had already succumbed...

And yet,

Water was found, and life was protected and sustained.

I would invite you to focus on the possibility that no matter how little we understand of the mystery of Yahweh God's purposes and provision for us...the ultimate goal of the message of Exodus is to know that God is found in desert places, as LIFE.

In your life.

In the life of plants and pets and possibilities.

In the life of your friend and of your enemy.

In the power of the seed to shatter its casing and grow deep and grow high.

In the power of hope to shatter the casing of anger and despair and try again and again, build again and again.

In the power of life on our precious blue green Earth.

Here's the thing, those poor darn runaway slaves were losing everything, and afraid of dying at every moment. Everything was going wrong, everything was filled with anxiety and danger, and yet...they found a way.

God promised LIFE even in the face of death.

And against all expectations, they kept finding LIFE. Water, and manna, and quail.

And the Torah, that gave them a guideline for living without chaos or imprisonment.

It is World Communion Sunday today. Around the world, Christians everywhere, gather at tables that are set by Jesus. And like Yahweh, Jesus set a table in the wilderness that was a table of life and hope and promise.

All over the world, Christians wonder, in doubt and faith, in confusion and in hope, is God in our midst?

Yes, Jesus says. Take and eat, here is LIFE. Take and drink, here is God in your midst.

Whatever desert you find yourself in, still, Yahweh is there as LIFE. Giving strength, and courage and hope and determination.

You are not abandoned, we are not alone.

For God has set a table of LIFE.

Jesus invites the entire world to the table he sets in love and peace and welcome.

We begin, here, and now, the feast of the table of LIFE that honors God and all God's creation, in every place...even the desert.