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First Presbyterian Church  
March 15, 2020  
Exodus 17:1-7  
Lent 3

*Loving and merciful Lord, by your word we are nourished, by your hand we are fed. Turn our hearts to you now, as we listen to your word. Amen.*

### **“The Wilderness”**

Walt Disney’s movie “The Prince of Egypt” is an adaptation of the story of Moses. It’s popular among the 10 and under crowd. The movie portrays Moses responding to God’s call to confront Pharaoh and lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. In the last few minutes of the movie, we see Moses, Aaron, Miriam and Zipporah hug, sing, dance, and praise God for victory.

What “The Prince of Egypt” doesn’t show is what happens in chapters 16-19 of Exodus because those chapters would kill the joy Disney wants you to feel. Which we really can’t blame them for; “The Prince of Egypt” is, after all, a children’s movie. And most children want to see and hear balloons and noisemakers more than they want to see and hear complaints about hunger and thirst.

But as adults we know life isn’t one big party. We know it has its difficult moments – now more than ever. People get sick, money is tight, jobs are hard to come by, relationships are strained, things don’t always work out as planned, and pandemics happen. A month or so ago one of our members asked me if I’d heard about the virus gripping China. “I haven’t kept up with the news lately,” I replied. Who knew that 4 weeks later, we’d all be here. Or not here, as the case may be.

“Is the Lord among us or not?” we ask. Is the Lord among us or not?

That question is the one the Israelites keep asking. They’re in the Wilderness and they’re hungry. Not long after their liberation from Egypt, they begin to complain: “Why have you brought us out here to kill us with hunger? Why did you bring us out here to die of thirst? We’d rather be back

in Egypt where at least there was enough to eat. Is the Lord among us or not?" It's not an unreasonable question to ask. I have seen the Sinai desert, I've experienced the gripping heat of Egypt's upper peninsula; the desert is massive . . . flying over it, it seems to go on and on and on. And Egypt's heat is unbearable.

So the Israelites' question is not at all unreasonable, and their complaints are not unwarranted. It's perfectly fair to ask, Are you with us or against us?

Is the Lord among us, or not?

Do you remember when you first asked your own variation of this question? Because this isn't some abstract question, it's deeply personal. You might have been a teenager grieving the loss of a friend in a car accident, or grieving the loss of a grandparent to illness; or grieving the fact that your family moved from the town of your birth and rearing to a place you didn't know and where you were not known; or maybe you asked it when your parents divorced, or you experienced the break-up of a relationship, or the deterioration of one.

Many of us can identify a situation in our lives when circumstances seemed dire, hope was lost, and we were filled with fear and anger: you have cancer, I never loved you anyway, no one will believe you, you have 30 days to vacate, you no longer have a job here, classes are cancelled and you need to go home.

All of us have spent time in the wilderness and we're in it now. This pandemic is a wilderness. Pastors haven't lived through this, and neither have health care workers or businesses or the government or educational institutions or you or anyone else we're looking to for guidance or answers. This is new territory, this pandemic, and some of the answers we want we may not get, and some of the answers we get, we may not want.

When the Israelites left Egypt, they thought they left all of their questions behind them. That everything was answered, and they were headed to the

Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. The land where God is present and all of their questions are answered.

But what they didn't know and what they weren't prepared for, was that they had to go through the wilderness to get that land. And so they quarrel and complain because their environment is stressful, and they can't get answers to their questions. Sound familiar?

I'm guessing there are a lot of questions we all want answered. I'd like to know if my son in Denver is going to have classes next quarter, or if he should prepare to come home for good. I want to know if my other son will get to experience all of those senior-year college traditions he's been so looking forward to, or if they'll be cancelled – including commencement. Those of you with loved ones in health care facilities want to know when you'll be able to visit your loved one in person, and some of you want to know how the school is really going to do this online learning thing and how you'll survive it! And many want to know when tests will be available, and how long this social distancing or self-quarantine will last. We all have questions; we all want answers, just like the Israelites did those many years ago. And now more than ever, I appreciate their grumbling.

But I also trust that in due time answers will come. And I hear in this story God's compassion, and presence, and patience with those who grumble.

God heard the cries of the Israelites and responded to them with water, which is a most basic need. I trust that in due time God will meet our basic needs – that God will meet them through the form of health care professionals who are caring for the sick, or scientists who are searching for a vaccine, or social workers or teachers or counselors who are working overtime to make sure families and children are going to be OK during this pandemic, and through all of us who will check in on our neighbors and friends and family to make sure they're alright.

Friends, wherever we are, whatever our circumstance, whatever our suffering, whatever our lot, I believe God is in it with us and in that is our hope.

Nowhere in scripture does God ever promise that there will be no wilderness to traverse. Nowhere does God promise lives of ease. Nowhere does God promise us lives free from loss, or free from pain or free from disappointment. What scripture does witness to is that God is with us in the wilderness and will lead us through it. And I believe that God is with us in this wilderness and comes to us in the form of other people who will lead us forward to the rock that springs forth water.

Is the Lord among us or not? We hear the promise: yes. I am in front of you. I will be in front of you. In our thirst God remains with us, and God fills the cracks in our hearts with God's presence. God stands in front of us through friends and family reaching out to us in genuine love. God stands in front of us through a song that soothes and a gentle smile and a virtual embrace. God stands in front of us as the sun's rays warm our faces and the rain cools our tempers. God stands in front of us and pulls us together and invites us to help each other answer our question, 'Is God among us or not?'

'Yes, I am,' says God. I am among the physically and spiritually thirsty and among those who might help in quenching that thirst. I am among the sick and the downtrodden. I am in hospitals with the sick, long-term care facilities with the frail, and at home with you. I stand in front of you calling you to each other, calling you to take up your staff and take care of yourself and one another during this wilderness time.

Friends, no matter where you are, take care of one another and take care of yourself, and know that God is there with you and leads us to the Promised Land.

Amen.

# Exodus 17:1-7 Common English Bible (CEB)

## Water from a rock

**17** The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the LORD commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. <sup>2</sup>The people argued with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses said to them, "Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the LORD?"

<sup>3</sup>But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?"

<sup>4</sup>So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me."

<sup>5</sup>The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel's elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd's rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. <sup>6</sup>I'll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink." Moses did so while Israel's elders watched. <sup>7</sup>He called the place Massah<sup>[a]</sup> and Meribah,<sup>[b]</sup> because the Israelites argued with and tested the LORD, asking, "Is the LORD really with us or not?"