

## **Water From A Rock**

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Lent, March 14, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

I recently read the account of a young husband, wife, and 10 month old child, stranded in a snow storm in the Rocky Mountains. The husband had foolishly tried to take back roads through the Mountains where they were caught in Nevada's worst blizzard in 30 years. They were 50 miles from the nearest town, snowbound, in below-freezing weather. For five days, the parents ate junk food in the car and the baby nursed contentedly and was kept warm next to his parents. When no help arrived, they began to set out on foot toward a major highway. They walked through the drifting snow for 20 hours until the mother could go on no farther. Her husband found a cave, lined it with sleeping bags, made a garment bag shield for the door and left his wife and baby to hike for help. For the next 48 hours that mother lay in the cave holding the baby next to her body, feeding it as she sucked pieces of ice and snow to replenish her own fluids. The story has a happy ending. The mother, father and child were all rescued. But I can easily imagine that woman saying to her foolish husband as they were going through the worst of the experience, "Have you brought us out here in the wilderness to kill us?" We could all be sympathetic if that couple asked, "Is the Lord with us or not?"

The children of Israel were in Rephidim, located in the wilderness of what is now Southwestern Saudi Arabia. They arrived to discover that the oasis was dry. The Sun beat down upon them unmercilessly. Without water, and in the desert heat, their livestock would die. Their children would die. They'd all soon provide carrion for the buzzards unless they had water.

"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?' And they asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" I can't really blame them for complaining and grumbling. We've all grumbled in far less desperate situations.

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...."

There are times in our lives when we don't know what to do. People are angry with us. They're quarreling with us, criticizing us. We feel frustrated and helpless and don't know what to do except to cry out to the Lord. There are three things the Lord instructed Moses to do that may be helpful to us when we're going through a crisis in our life.

1. '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.'"

When God originally called Moses in the wilderness and gave him his assignment, he said, "What is that in your hand?" Moses looked down at the shepherd crook and he said, "It's staff." God said, "Throw it on the ground." Moses did and it became a serpent. God said, "Put forth your hand and take it by the tail." Moses obeyed it became a staff again. Later, that staff was the instrument of God's wrath against Pharaoh and Egypt. At the Lord's command, Moses lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river and all the water in the river was turned to blood (7:20). Later still, when the children of Israel had

their backs against the sea and facing the oncoming Egyptian army, the Lord commanded Moses to lift up his staff before the Red Sea and stretch it out over the sea and the sea was divided and the people of Israel passed through on dry ground.

What significance that staff had for Moses. It was the visible sign of God's invisible power and grace. It was like a sacrament. The sacraments are meant to strengthen and assure us. When Moses took that staff in his hand it reminded him of how God had delivered his people in the past and how he would provide for them in the future.

That staff is like the Bible for Christians. This past week I came across my father's well used Bible. My memory took me back to quiet Sunday afternoons when there was no television and the radio was turned off and my father, this big, masculine, labor union man, would take that Bible in his hand and read it on Sunday afternoons. I took the bible in my hands and opened it. It naturally opened to the Book of Psalms. The edge of the pages were torn and mutilated with constant use. And as I flipped through the Bible I discovered that the edges of the pages of the Gospel of John likewise gave indications of having been well used.

And I thought of how the book of Psalms and the Gospel of John must have had special significance for him in the crises in his life; when he was unemployed during the Great Depression, when he was disabled by a taxi-cab struck him in Philadelphia and broke his leg, and, near the end of his life, when he sensed his mental powers disintegrating as a result of Alzheimer's disease. Did the Psalms and Gospel of John provide refreshing water for his spirit as he read. That Bible came for me, like the staff of Moses, it took on sacramental significance. It was an object used by God to provide living water for my father in the wilderness of his mind.

When I've gone through crises in my life, I've taken my Bible in my hands and gone forward remembering how the Word of God has been a means of refreshment and grace to me in the past. When you're going through a crisis take your Bible, the written Word of God, in your hand and go forward to meet the crisis. The Bible, like the staff of Moses, reminds us of how God has carried us through crises in the past. In the crises of our life, it may become for us a means of grace which God will use to give us the water of life.

2. "Take the staff and go" the Lord commands, "and I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb." What does it mean to have faith in God if it does not mean that we trust that, in the crises of our life, God will be standing there in front of you? Notice who this One is who says, "I will be standing there in front of you?" It's the very one who became a human being and stood before the Samaritan woman at the well and promised to give her living waters. It's the very One who stood there in front of the grieving and hopeless disciples after the death of Jesus and said, "I am alive forever more."

In the crises of our lives the Lord says to us, "I will be standing there in front of you." Open your eyes to see this One. Open your ears to hear this One's promise. It's good to have our friends and loved ones standing there with us and before us when we're going through a crisis. But this One who promises to stand with us can do for us and be for us what no other person can do and be.

For example, here you sit, and here I stand before you. I sincerely want to stand by you. You possibly feel it and even believe me. I might succeed in comforting you and cheering you up as I share with you the Gospel. But let's be perfectly honest. I can't put your life in order. I can't save you. I can't give you living water which wells up into

eternal life. No mere human being can do this.

But the good news is that he who stood before Moses in the wilderness has come to us in Jesus of Nazareth. He who was born on Christmas Day and died on Good Friday and rose from the dead on Easter Sunday stands before us. He does so in power, in the power to help us at any cost, to shield us against each and everyone, above all against our worst enemy, ourself. He stands before us to save us and to guarantee that we shall drink of the living waters that well up into eternal life. He stands before us now and in every crisis of our life. He will stand there before you at the hour of your death.

3. Finally, the Lord said to Moses, "Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." St Paul refers to this story in 1 Corinthians 10, where he writes,

"I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ."

There's an old Jewish legend that this rock Moses struck followed the people of Israel, miraculously, and that they drank from it all the time they were in the wilderness. There's no biblical evidence for this fanciful legend, but Paul, interestingly enough, speaks of the rock that followed the children of Israel in their desert wanderings. He says that this Rock, was Christ. That is, this Rock, reminds us of what Christ does. This Rock points us to Christ. He suggests that the pre-incarnate Christ was present, though unseen, with God's people in the wilderness to save them just as the Risen and glorified Christ is present with us, though unseen, to save us.

You remember how Jesus said to the woman of Samaria, near the village of Sychar, that if she drank of the water that He gave, that there would be in her a well of water springing up into everlasting life. Jesus said, "All you have to do to have this water of

life is to trust in me. If anyone thirsts, let him come to me." Trusting is coming. Coming is trusting.

We might find ourselves in the wilderness one day. You might, even now, feel that you are in the wilderness without water. There's always a wilderness through which we pass on our pilgrimage from bondage and slavery to the freedom of the children of God. But God doesn't abandon us in our wilderness experience. He gives us the Bible as a staff, which reminds us of how God has acted in the past to save his people. He promises to stand before us, though unseen and, perhaps, unfelt. And in the crises of our lives Christ, the living water, is with us promising us eternal life through faith in him

Let us pray: O Lord God, we bring our empty, dry and arid selves to you for holy and divine replenishing. Grant, not only that our own souls may be replenished, but that there may be an overflow of your Holy Spirit of the water of life into other lives. This we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.