

“Thirsty for More”
Exodus 17:1-17
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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.

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?"

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?"

So Moses cried out to the LORD,

"What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me."

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.

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.

He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the LORD, asking, "Is the LORD really with us or not?"

The Israelites were on a journey.
A wilderness journey.

Like in an action-packed movie, we encounter them on their trip to the promised land at several significant points.

Already the living God who had wished to bring them out of slavery in Egypt had protected them during horrific plagues.

The same God opened the sea for them, keeping them safe from their enslavers.

When they were hungry and complaining, manna - bread from heaven - rained upon them and filled their bellies!

Now, we find them thirsty.

And grumbling once again.

It's at this point in the story that I feel like I can almost hear them whining, "Are we there yet?!"

The Israelites are on a long, long journey, with no end in sight.

Now as tempting as it is to take the Israelites' grumbling lightly, let's really consider what's going on.

They are in the wilderness, a kind of desert wildness that makes our Sonoran desert look lush.

They are tired from walking.

They might even be tired of each other.

And they are thirsty.

Very thirsty.

Have you ever ventured out for a hike in our desert and not had enough water?

Have you ever been lost out there?

Or even felt lost out there - turned around and unsure of where you're headed?

I've maybe had *glimpses* of what it's like to feel lost and thirsty out in the desert.

But I've never been without someone who could reassure me that we were not totally lost.

And typically my hiking buddies have water to share.

So though my experience or your experience may not be the same, I think it's always helpful to try to understand, as best as we can, what's going on in our story.

Try to walk in their footsteps for a moment.

So we can't really fault them for being thirsty, right?

They're being led through the desert wilderness and they need water.

But boy do their memories seem short!

Didn't they just get done grumbling to Moses and Aaron about being hungry?

And yet what happened?

God provided!

And God gave them what they needed.

Just like many other instances before.

Yet they grumble.

They complain.

They challenge their leader and argue with him.

They argue with Moses to the point that he fears they will STONE him.

This is grumbling to the nth degree!

Now, the Israelites grumble saying they are thirsty for water.

But I suspect they are thirsty for so much more.

I believe the Israelites are thirsty for a visible reassurance that God is still with them - that God hasn't brought them this far just to abandon them now.

And perhaps like so many of us on our own journeys, they are yearning for signs that they aren't having to travel this tough path alone.

So assuming that we're all probably something like the Israelites, grumbling from time to time, I wonder...

When we are grumbling - either as a faith family or as individuals - what are we really thirsty for?

Because there's usually something bigger going on below the grumbles.

Sure, grumbling can stay on the surface, looking for any ear that will listen.

But grumbling can also push us to figure out what's really going on deep inside of us.

In the example of the Israelites, we see that a real need has not been met.

They are thirsty because they have no water.

But the level to which they grumble and complain (again, Moses worries that they are going to stone him!) points to that bigger fear - that God has abandoned them on their journey.

So I ask again: When we are grumbling, what are we really thirsty for?

If we find ourselves grumbling often, might it be because we're **unhappy**?

If so, then maybe we're thirsty for happiness.

If we find ourselves grumbling often, might it be because we're **scared**?

If so, then maybe we're thirsty for reassurance and safety.

If we find ourselves grumbling often, might it be because we've felt **wounded or offended**?

If so, then maybe we're thirsty for that honest conversation to clear the air and help us be better understood.

This list of questions could go on and on...

When we are grumbling, what are we really thirsty for?

As Moses points out to the Israelites, in their grumbling and testing of God, they are asking a bigger question:

"Is the Lord really with us or not?"

That's a big question.

To me, this question feels timeless.

It's something that I think every generation has at least wondered, if not said aloud.

Perhaps it's something many of us may be feeling right now.

"Is the Lord really with us or not?"

Looking around at our world today, there is much that probably makes us grumble.

There is much that might also make us question God's presence with us.

Are we alone on this journey? We wonder as we listen to the news.

Are we alone on this journey? We wonder as we watch our neighbors suffer.

Are we alone on this journey? We wonder as we mechanically go through our days without any passion or excitement.

Are we alone on this journey?

Has God brought us this far just to abandon us now?

Paying attention to what makes us grumble is important because it can lead us to the root cause of our dissatisfaction.

But if we linger there too long -

- if we get too comfortable with grumbling being our default position when things get tough -- then I suspect we will eventually become blind to God's presence and provision.

We will miss seeing those signs of new life all around us.

Because we know how the journey ends for the Israelites - because we know they will make it to the promised land - we can almost arrogantly shake our heads knowing that even after water being struck from a rock to quench their thirst, the Israelites will soon again forget God's long record of provision.

But we have to avoid the same daily trap.

We have to dig deeper into what makes us grumble and catch ourselves before we cling too tightly to that attitude.

Lent is a time when we, too, journey for forty days.

We dig deeper into our hearts.

We pay attention to what's happening there as a way of growing closer to God.

We may abstain from certain habits that distract us, or we may try out new habits that bring us closer to God.

Recently, an acquaintance was talking about how she was giving up complaining for Lent.

Now it sounds humorous, but it's been really challenging for her.

Day by day, she's working to cut grumbling out of her life.

When hearing about this, her friend offered a slightly different twist on this Lenten challenge.

When you feel a complaint coming on, turn it into a positive statement.

For example:

- "That pile of dirty dishes has a wonderful symmetry."
- "This traffic jam has given me the opportunity to notice the lovely cloud formations in the sky. And isn't that a funny bumper sticker on that car to the left of me."
- "That person who's checking out 30 items in the 10 items or less line has certainly picked out some beautiful produce. "

These are funny examples, of course, but what do you suppose happens when we shift our thinking?

When we pause for a bit and try hard to see something a different way?

Our attitudes and hearts can change.

We might be able to see things more clearly.

We might begin to see signs of God's presence with us.

If the Israelites were trying out this exercise, perhaps they would've said...

- "Through talking about how thirsty we both are, I discovered that the person walking next to me is actually really funny. I'd never talked to her before."
- "If I'd known we'd go without water so long, I would've slowed down when I ate my manna today. But boy am I thankful for that gift from heaven."
- "If Moses and Aaron can push on ahead without water, so can I."

Though it can be hard to feel God's presence with us, we have to trust the past.

The same living God that brought the Israelites out of slavery is the same God who journeys with us today.

When we shift our default attitude from complaining to trust, we may begin to see new signs of life we've never noticed before.

God instructed Moses to strike the rock and out came the water that quenched the Israelites' thirst.

It was a life-giving act!

When we move beyond grumbling, what signs of life do we see around us?

Who's out there walking alongside us on the tough days?

Who's out there creating positive change in our community?

Sharing love in the midst of hate?

Surely these actions quench others' thirst for happiness, safety, friendship, and purpose.

And in doing so, we may see the living God more clearly than ever, even in the midst of a long, wilderness journey.

May it be so...