

*The Song is in the Water*

Exodus 17:1-7

Whitefish UMC

September 25, 2011

- † You hear it nearly every day in some form of media: we the people are angry, and we're looking for someone to blame. The economy teeters, the American dream is in jeopardy, and the politicians don't know how to fix it. Instead they engage in daily practices of blaming the other side for all our misfortunes.
- † Lest we think that our situation is unique in history, we return to this morning's scripture that Becky just read from the book of Exodus. It can be summarized like this: The Lord delivers, then leads the people through a parched, perilous zone. Therefore the people find fault—with both God and Moses.
- † As James Howell writes: "Moses hears their murmuring, then turns to God in frustration: *What shall I do with this people?* Notice he disowns them. Instead of what shall I do with *my* people, he says *this* people. Notice the little two-letter word in this frustrated question: *What shall I do with this people?*" Moses wants to fix them up, manage them, control the situation. But it's not up to him.
- † The Israelites ask a pointed question: "Is the Lord among us or not?" And it's a good question. It's a question we ask, too. We know from experience that belief is hard, that God often seems to have walked off the stage. What

better question is there—in those Bronze Age times and in ours: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

- † For like many of us, the Israelites were just trying to survive. “Survival is no small thing; and, in fact, we find ourselves far more intrigued by survival than we care to admit. The film *127 Hours* shows us the story of Aron Ralston, who winds up severing his own arm in order to escape a canyon in Utah where he is hopelessly trapped.
- † The bestselling book *Unbroken* (that our bookclub and many others read) tells the incredible saga of Louis Zamperini, who survived a crash in the Pacific, weeks on a raft battling sharks and Japanese planes, and then months of torture in a prison camp. We know of Holocaust survivors, including a woman whose parents, in desperation, hid her in a potato sack when she was three years old, tossed it onto the back of a truck, and lives to praise the miracle of survival.
- † How many of you recall when you were younger, and more foolish, poking fun at mere survival? I once said if all you are doing is surviving, that's pretty lame; or if a church is merely surviving, that's a waste. But survival is underrated--until you think you might not survive. The doctor says, "It's malignant; there's a 30% chance of survival" or "We predict you have six months to three years to live." Now when that happens, your full time business is survival, and you want nothing more than one more time to stick your feet in the ocean or tuck your little ones into bed.
- † James Howell writes: “But we are wired to want more than mere survival... We are the peculiar, tortured, wonderful creatures who always itch for more, more love, more meaning. There's some dissatisfaction that gnaws at us, and I believe this craving of transcendence, this reaching

beyond survival, is God calling us home; and it may be our best answer to the question *Is the Lord among us or not?* It may be the ultimate proof--if there is such a thing within our own souls--of the reality of God.

- † The people of Israel found fault with Moses, with God, and probably, somewhere deep inside, with themselves. God's response? It's all grace, it's all mercy. They survive to live another day to try to grasp the unfathomable, the presence of God that isn't a flashing light or a winning lottery ticket, but the mysterious presence of God noticed in the silence, perhaps even in the eyes of one another.
- † I wonder if the reason we look for proof, the reason we find fault with others, with God, with ourselves, and the reason we want to survive, and yet virtually demand more than mere survival, is that the universe is about nothing more and nothing less than grace, and grace is in the heart of God, not in our hands. When Dante thought about creation, he spoke of "the Love that moves the stars." When the Beatles thought about Vietnam, the other troubles of the world, they sang, "All you need is love." Beth Nielsen Chapman sang, "All that matters in the end is how we love," and the Bible's most famous verse is "For God so loved the world."
- † I know this kind of talk is risky; we get sentimental and sappy and absurdly confused about love. But the love that is the grace of God is hard for us to grasp, because we are graspers, we want to do something with this people, we want to find fault with what can't really be the unconditional regard in God's heart for me, for that guy over there. We think we might cause God to love us, but the cause of grace is found only in God.
- † God doesn't mind being put to the proof. Here's what happened around the year 30 A.D. Jesus found himself in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles, when the Jews remembered and celebrated the gift of water in

the wilderness. We can envision the scene: all the pilgrim throng, the poor peasants who had journeyed there from all over the place, gathered at the foot of Mt. Zion, where the spring Gihon spouts water that becomes the pool of Siloam. The priest would dip a golden pitcher into the water, and they would process up the hill toward the temple, singing Psalms, waving branches cut from the trees, and when the priest would get to the summit, he would pause for silence, then pour the water out on the ground.

† This year, Jesus was in that crowd, and from the sidelines, he spoke up, and said, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.’ And then John chapter 7 adds some mystifying words about ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” These are in part the words we celebrate on our banner. “I think John was anticipating what was to come, when Jesus had just breathed his last, and the soldier pierced his side with a spear, and not just blood but also water, living water, baptismal water, poured out. *For God so loved the world...If anyone is thirsty, let him come.*

† Louis Zamperini knew thirst out in the Pacific, but then after the war he came forward during Billy Graham's first big revival in Los Angeles and accepted Christ--and was cured of his nightmares and alcoholism. *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with thy powerful hand. Open now the crystal fountain, whence the healing stream doth flow.*

† Those words are from a hymn, and what is a bit surprising, at least to me, is that way back in Old Testament times, we know the people sang about this moment in the wilderness, when the people murmured and found fault and put the Lord to the test. We have not one but *five* Psalms that put the drama of this crazy encounter in the desert to music, Psalms 78, 81, 95, 105, and

106! You'd think you'd sweep such embarrassing moments under the carpet, but Israel sang of their failure and of the grace and healing waters.

- † Maybe the proof is in the singing. Steve Martin once realized that the religious people have so much good music, so he wrote the first ever atheist hymn--the entire atheist hymnal on a single page. "Atheists don't have no songs! Christians have their hymns and pages," he sang. "Baptists have their rock of ages, no one ever wrote a tune for godless existentialism, atheist songs add up to nada, but they do have Sundays free."
- † But we sing; and it is the music, raising voices together that moves us, that defines our innermost being. Slaves survived--but they did more than survive--by singing *Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world--goin' home to live with God!* The old hymn we just sang is all about grace, the cure of all fault, thirst quenched, survival and much more: *Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in me; let the water and the blood from thy wounded side which flowed be of sin the double cure. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. When my eyes are closed in death, Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.*
- † The other night in youth group, we played one of Rob Bell's short videos that speaks these truths so beautifully. (Yes, this is a shameless promotion for coming to hear the rest of the series. And we didn't have our usual special music—except that Dawn's music is always special—so let this piece be it.) Often I see one these DVD's and think: well this one is now my favorite. Maybe I think that about this piece, called Rhythm, because of the profound observations on faith it provoked from Thomas and Mason. Enjoy it now.
- † *Is the Lord among us or not?* If we can hear the song in the water that flows from the rock, that flows from river of God's heart, the answer rests with us.

If we are made in the image of God, and if Jesus is the perfect image of God, and we are now the Body of Christ, then when we sing the song, when we love, when we are the recipients and also the vehicles of grace—the answer is yes.

- † When we touch anyone who is in need, Christ becomes so present we can touch him. Christ happens, and the healing waters flow, and the songs are sung.
- † What finally made the Israelites know the Lord's presence was the fact that the water they were thirsty for was right there, just under the surface, all along. God's grace, the love, the song, is there. We don't have to create it, we couldn't create it, it's just there, set loose only when there is a fracture, a break in the surface, a fissure in the hard rock of our controlled reality.
- † There's a little song that speaks of this grace: Let's try it—"Water, River, Spirit, Grace." No. 2253.
- † Can you hear the song in the water? Let the waters and the music and the grace flow. Amen.

*A good portion of this sermon comes from the writing of Dr. James Howell, pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church in Charlotte, NC. It appears in this week's Day1 webcast.*