



September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Rector  
Readings: Exodus 17: 1-7, Philippians 2:1-13  
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16  
Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32

I've been thinking a lot again about how God makes a way out of no way...specifically, how God takes what we fear the most — what we fear the most — what we're certain there is no way through...and uses precisely that to shower us with grace and remind us where true power lies.

In this portion from Exodus, the Israelites are out in the desert, and though they have just been fed, incredulously, by manna from heaven and quail appearing overnight, they still are discontent, discomfited, uncomfortable, ready to get out of there. If the wilderness was as they first emerged from Egypt a pleasant and welcome change of scenery and change of pace, that was, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, that was before the sand coated them like a second skin, before their lips cracked from too much sun and too little water.

And, alas, here today, they are thirsty, thirsty, and really thirsty, and, yet, there is no water to be found. So they appeal to Moses repeatedly, *"We're thirsty! Find us water!"* Moses, seeing none, appeals to God, crying out in exasperation we can so clearly imagine and probably feel, *"What shall I do with these people? They are about to stone me."*

And God says, *"Go on ahead. Don't go alone. Bring some of the other leaders with you. And you will see...what?...you will see a stone. And I will be there. I will be standing right there. Take, Moses, take that staff with which you struck the Nile and remember what happened then? Take that same staff and strike this rock, and water will pour forth that will sustain everyone."*

Moses goes and does that, probably without being able to imagine what will happen, likely having doubts in his heart about what will happen, bracing perhaps from the reverberation on his wrists and arms after he strikes a rock with a stick, ready to watch that staff snap and splinter into pieces.

And then where would Moses' leadership be without that staff, without that visceral memory of how God has led them and saved them before?

And...he strikes the rock. And there the water gushes forth like waves, almost like the waves of the Nile, the waves of the sea. And everybody pours forth and they drink the water they need. And they are sustained.

And they named that spot after the feelings they had and the words they said to one another and to God in that very spot, *"We're going to name this place "Testing" (Massah) and "Quarreling" (Meribah) because that is what we did here."*

And God showed up, God showed up in the stone of fear, Moses' fear. God showed up in the stone of violence, an instrument of violence and transformed it into nothing less than a source of life, sustenance, providence, pleasure, nourishment and wonder.

The instrument of death becomes the source of life, and Moses' fear, the people's fear, is transformed into torrents, waves cascades...streams of grace, streams of mercy never ceasing.

The Rev. Dr. Sam Wells, Vicar of St. Martin's in the Field in London, recently said that the work of a prophet (and I would add the work of a leader and the work of a person of faith, the work of a follower of Christ) is in large part about reminding people what has happened before...how God and when God has shown up before.

Providence itself is a mystery. God is an utter mystery, but we, as humans, bear signs among one another. We carry memories for one another.

About when God has shown up...

Precisely when we were most afraid.

Precisely when we were at our wit's end.

Precisely when we were out of energy, depleted of our strength, when we felt farthest from God.

When we asked in our hearts and out loud, *"Is God with us or not?"*

It is exactly in those questions, in those moments of dark and strife...and I know currently they're not just moments...but they seem to stretch out ceaselessly ahead of us. And I want to tell you that God is not any farther away...that God is near.

The water was waiting in that rock all this time, and they had not perceived it.

Where is God waiting for you?

I also heard Bishop Rob Wright of Atlanta speak earlier this week about our life of faith being sometimes like a photo album, taking snapshots in our minds of when God has shown up and what it had felt like.

And though we are inclined to make memories of the joy and wonder and splendor, and rightly we should, in our photo album of faith we also make memories of the times when we really struggled and we were truly, viscerally afraid. And our nerves were shot. And our energy seemed to slip from our fingers.

And we did ask, *“Is God around...or not?”*

Those, too, are images of our life of faith just as much as those amazing moments of joy and wonder and gratitude. For that is what the Israelites did right here...naming the place for their testing and quarreling and their uprising and their doubts and their fear.

God is our refuge.

God is our strength.

God makes a way of out of no way.

Might you trust along with me that God is present and at hand?

May we listen closely for the direction to seek nourishment in something as simple as a stone, and to seek God right in the midst of our unceasing fear. May we look together for the grace and mercy and the hope that will pour forth among us.

Thanks be to God.