

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 19, 2017
Third Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton once observed that “the essence of sin is ingratitude.” If one ever needed evidence or proof of that maxim, one would not need to look further than today’s Old Testament lesson from Exodus.

The children of Israel are on the move. God has rescued them from slavery in Egypt and is leading them toward the land of Promise. But the road from Egypt to the Promised Land is not exactly a straight line from point A to point B. Deliverance from slavery is a wonderful thing, but the children of Israel also find their equilibrium upset, because their new life requires a *daily* trust and commitment that tests them to their very core.

They are moving from place to place, from camp to camp, and every day is a new venture into the unknown. Every day they must trust in God for the bare necessities. Days turn to weeks, weeks turn to months, and before long you have a group of people who are having a real hard time trying to “accentuate the positive.”

When they arrive at Rephidim, they discover what appears to be the “deal breaker.” There is no water.

So they come together, and they complain or “murmur” against Moses: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us? We’re all going to die out here in this Godforsaken wilderness. We need some water.” After all the people have been through, desert *hardships* have now produced hardened *hearts*.

So Moses pleads with the Lord and prays, and God instructs him to take his shepherd’s staff and strike the rock near Mt. Sinai. He does so, and water gushes forth as the people stand by and watch, bewildered.

This is amazing, of course, not just because of the miracle, but because water in the Old Testament is also seen as a metaphor for the satisfaction of spiritual needs. Psalm 23:2 says, “He leads me besides still waters.” Psalm 42:1 says, “As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” And Isaiah 12:3 says, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

Now, come with me to our Gospel lesson. Jesus has left Judea in order to go North to Galilee. In Samaria, Jesus meets a woman at Jacob’s well in the village of Sychar. He strikes up a conversation with her, and this becomes the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and an individual in the New Testament.

Like the children of Israel at Rephidim, Jesus is also thirsty – but his thirst is for *souls*. He longs to give the Samaritan woman the *living waters* that well up to eternal life.

The Samaritans, remember, were Israelites who escaped exile when Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom eight centuries before Christ (see 2 Kings 17:6, 24-41). They were despised for intermarrying with non-Israelites and worshipping at Mount Gerazim, not Jerusalem. But Jesus tells this woman that the “hour” of true worship is coming, when all people will worship God in spirit and truth.

I’ve often wondered what Jesus meant by this statement. But with the help of the Apostle Paul, I made a little progress this week. I think that the “hour” Jesus speaks of with the woman here is the “appointed time” that Paul speaks of to the Romans. He tells them, “At just the right time, when we were powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). *The hour Jesus speaks of to this woman is the hour when he, the Rock of our salvation, will hang on the cross.*

As I thought more about this, these words from the Apostle Paul hit me:

I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. (I Cor. 10:1-4)

Wow. I believe that the “hour” that Jesus speaks to this woman about at the well *was the hour that he hung on the Cross.* In Paul’s words, it was “just the right time,” or “the appointed time.”

The Rock from which the water poured forth at Rephidim for our ancestors was Christ himself, and from earliest times the Church has also understood those

waters to be the healing waters of the Holy Spirit. Remember Jesus' words on the last day of the Passover feast before his death? He said: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. *By this he meant the Spirit,* whom those who believed in him were later to receive" (John 7:37-38)

Through those waters the ancient hatred between Samaritans and Jews were washed away. By those waters the dividing wall between Israel and the nations is broken down. By those waters, everything that separates us from others is washed away. And since Jesus' hour, *all persons* may drink of the Spirit in baptism (cf. I Cor. 12:13).

And as we gather at the Table, the Lord is in our midst *now* even as he was present in the rock at Horeb and at Jacob's well near Sychar. He is here, ready to pour out the love of God into our hearts by the same Holy Spirit.

As you come today, perhaps there is something in your life that is robbing you of your joy, and perhaps even tempting you to murmur or complain against God. Something where you are losing sight of gratitude, and opting to *complain* rather than *trust*.

Bring that need or challenge with you. Open your hearts and minds once again to God's power and provision. Let the healing waters of His grace flow down upon you. And allow that grace to turn to gratitude.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.