

“Water from the Ground”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 27, 2026

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Exodus 17:1-7

“Is the Lord among us or not?” The concluding words of this passage describe the state of mind of the Israelites as they encounter yet another life-threatening obstacle in the desert. What proof and signs can persuade a thirsting, frightened people that God is with them and is leading them in and through the wilderness?

They have already, in chapter 15, dealt with a three-day stretch of thirst and encountered undrinkable water at Marah, a name referring to the “bitter” water that Moses “sweetened” and made potable following God’s instructions. Then, God answered the people’s urgent need for food, in chapter 16, by providing life-sustaining manna through which they see the glory of the Lord’s presence among them each morning. This daily bounty in an inhospitable land reminds the Israelites that the Lord is their God.¹

Now they travel to Rephidim, reaching Horeb, known as “the mountain of God,” where the Lord was first revealed to Moses in the burning bush. The literal meaning of Horeb is “dry place,” reflecting a waterless landscape that signals another threat to life. The people come to Moses and demand, “Give us water to drink!”

These three stories the scriptures tell about this desolate, in-between place all center on complaint. Here, we are told that the people quarrel with Moses and put God to the test, noted by the place names “Meribah,” which denotes charging someone for wrongdoing, and “Massah,” meaning test. Old Testament scholar Victor Hamilton translates these desolate place names as “Complainingburg” and “Testingville.”² And yet, only in the third instance of dire need are we told not that God is testing them, but

¹ Esther Menn in *WorkingPreacher.com*

² As referenced by Matthew Schlimm in *WorkingPreacher.com*

that the people put God to the test. Only in this final story is the Lord's presence raised as a question.

Moses, the leader who bears the brunt of the people's contention, fears the people will stone him, since the landscape has no edible plant life and no visible water, but it does have lots of rocks. Moses seems to have exhausted the avenues that are familiar to him and has no ideas for moving forward. In response to his desperate question, "What shall I do?" God tells Moses to look to the very landscape that has engendered the people's despair and his own mortal fear and tap the resources it does have to engineer a creative solution.

First, Moses must be willing to put himself out in front: "go on ahead of the people." That is, Moses must cross in front of the people, and in so doing become vulnerable to their anger, fear, and insistence. By doing so he will also see the need that is written upon their bodies and in their faces, and he will have to confront and respond to the magnitude of their thirst.

However, Moses is not the solution himself. Lest he imagine himself the sole agent of the people's salvation, he is to take with him a group of people, elders from among the Israelites. The elders carry with them their testimony to the past. They carry the trust and the hurt and the hopes of the people. In this new moment they will witness God's presence and saving action in the present. They will participate through their own ministry of courageous presence.

Moses must also take with him his staff. It is the same staff God found in his hand when the two first met at Horeb. It is an ordinary object: the support Moses would use to keep his footing sure and his body upright, the weapon he could use to defend sheep – or himself – against attackers. God turned it into an object of power through which Moses would work wonders in Egypt; and on the day of Israel's salvation it reconfigured the relation of water and dry land, parting the Red Sea. It could do the same once more.

Moses' staff had also been used in Exodus 7 to turn the life-giving Nile into a death-dealing canal of blood, producing such a horrendous odor that "the Egyptians could not drink its water." Here, in Exodus 17, the Israelites needed a similar miracle, but in reverse. Under pressure to quench Israel's thirst, Moses is told to "strike the rock" at Horeb in the same way that he struck the Nile. Water came forth, the people

were able to drink; a crisis averted by divine generosity.³ The Lord's presence among the Israelites is revealed through the provision of life-saving water out of the most unlikely source – a barren rock in the parched desert.

Unlearning the habits that were formed under Egypt's domination – which was constantly being reinforced by Pharaoh's cruel system of subjugation – is difficult, patient work. Accepting kindness and generosity when all one has known is violent exploitation was never going to be a quick or easy process for the freed people of Israel. Few would disagree that one of the Bible's most difficult commands is the call to "trust." This is especially true when the world teaches you that survival depends on distrust and skepticism. These wilderness stories demonstrate just how difficult it would be to transform a formerly enslaved people into a trusting nation.

As much as we – like the Israelites of old – experience the abundance of God's presence, it can still be difficult for us to trust. Individually, and as communities, we all face dry periods in life: those times when we are overwhelmed by our hunger and thirst. Gas prices and mortgage rates rise, health problems multiply and persist, businesses close, family or friends move away, technological changes seem to pass us by. Whatever the crisis or change, we have a hard time seeing how God can overcome the obstacles before us to make a way forward.

In the church, it may seem no different. Division and scandals persist. The two largest denominations in our country recently re-affirmed their opposition to women serving in ministry. And, while attendance falls – especially in congregations that are smaller and older – building needs seem to rise. How can our churches provide the programs and pay the bills and answer the questions and speak for justice and meet the needs we see around us?

These stories of scripture remind us that God is able to sweeten bitter water, to rain daily bread from heaven, and to bring water out of even the hardest surface. But our own response to situations of thirst and lack – like the Israelites faced – varies greatly. Sometimes it causes new fears and doubts as we allow our minds to spiral with worry. Other times, it results in our turning inward, thinking that we won't be able to help others if we can't even help ourselves. And yet, it sometimes can generate new insight about ourselves and about God; we remember how God has cared and

³ Michael Chan from *WorkingPreacher.com*

provided for us in the past; we discern new pathways forward even if we have never traveled them before; we learn how to trust more deeply.

As the church in this time and place, we are a part of the re-created Body of Christ. We live within the tradition of people who have journeyed through many wilderness places – situations often filled with complaints and tests – but who have emerged on the other side. As the church, we are not called to be extra-ordinarily successful in solving all the world’s problems; instead, we are called to trust that God will be faithful to us. In those moments we ask, “Is the Lord among us, or not?” God makes bitter water sweet, rains daily manna down upon us, and brings up water from a rock. Like a flowing river that never ends, God continually reminds us who we are and whose we are: created, chosen, called, and cared for by God.

I would like to conclude today with an excerpt from “A Brief Statement of Faith” in our denomination’s *Book of Confessions*:

We acknowledge that Christ chooses to be known in the world through this community of ordinary people, therefore we dare not despise or abandon the church. Christ is the head of the church, therefore we are responsible to Christ when we make policy and decisions in the church. Christ is the foundation of the church, therefore it will not fall despite our weakness. We are confident that the Lord of the church will judge and defeat our sinful intentions and actions, help us in our weakness and blindness, and use the church to accomplish his purposes.

Throughout its history the church has struggled to be faithful to God in political situations: under persecution, or as an established arm of the state, or in separation from it. God rules over both political and religious institutions. We must confuse neither with the kingdom of God. We must not equate the Christian faith with any nation’s way of life or with opposition to the ideologies of other nations. The church must be free to speak to civil authorities, neither claiming expert knowledge it does not have, nor remaining silent when God’s Word is clear.

We testify God is at work here and now when people obey Christ’s commission to witness to him and make disciples of all nations, when they spread the good news by their words and embody it in their lives.⁴

All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

⁴ “A Brief Statement of Faith” PC(USA) *Book of Confessions*