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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
September 25, 2011  
Exodus 17:1-7

*Loving and merciful Lord, by your word we are nourished, by your hand we are fed. Turn our hearts to you now, as we lift our prayers to you. Amen.*

### **“Water From Rock”**

Walt Disney’s movie “The Prince of Egypt” is an adaptation of the story of Moses. It’s popular among the 10 and under crowd. The movie portrays Moses responding to God’s call to confront Pharaoh and lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. In the last few minutes of the movie, we see Moses, Aaron, Miriam and Zipporah hug, sing, dance, and praise God for victory. This is followed by a picture of Moses holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments on the top of a mountain. Then the credits roll.

As I watched “The Prince of Egypt”, I wasn’t at all surprised that the filmmakers decide to skip over chapters 16-19 of Exodus and end the movie with Moses victorious on the mountaintop. The scenes missing from the movie would kill the joy associated with the exodus. This is, after all, a children’s movie. And most children want to see and hear balloons and noisemakers more than they want to see and hear complaints of hunger and thirst.

However, as adults we know life isn’t one big party. As much as we may want it to be (!), life has its down moments. Metaphorically speaking, balloons pop and noisemakers fizzle. People get sick, loved ones die, money is tight, jobs are hard to come, relationships are strained, and things don’t always work out as planned. “Is the Lord among us or not?” we ask. Is the Lord among us or not?

That question brings me to today’s story from Exodus. Two weeks ago we heard about the people of Israel, evacuated from Egypt and sent into in the wilderness. At the end of an unlikely and extraordinary series of events, they have been liberated from their slavery in Egypt. Moses has led them—all of them (some estimate the number to hover around 1 million people) out of Egypt. It was an evacuation. But at the last moment the Egyptians change their mind, send the army to recapture them and bring them back to slavery. But at the Red Sea, there is another unlikely development: the Egyptian army drowns and the Israelites escape.

Now they’re free—and not sure where they’re headed. It’s the Wilderness, the Sinai Desert, and they’re hungry. Not long after their liberation, they begin to complain: “Why have you brought us out here to kill us with hunger? We’d rather be back in Egypt where at least there was enough to eat.” So God provides. God sends manna, bread from heaven, every morning and quails to eat every evening.

This week they're still in the wilderness—and still complaining. This time they're thirsty. There's no water. Again they ask, "Why did you bring us out here to die of thirst? Is the Lord among us or not?" It is not an unreasonable question to ask. I have seen the Sinai desert, I've experienced the gripping heat of Egypt's upper peninsula; the desert is massive . . . flying over it, it seems to go on and on and on. And Egypt's heat is unbearable, worse than this summer in St. Louis.

So the Israelites question is not at all unreasonable, and their complaints are not unwarranted. It's perfectly fair to ask, why did you do this to us? And are you with us or against us?

And here I want to back up for just a moment to last week's sermon, because if I left you with the impression that it's not right to complain to God, I apologize. It is perfectly alright to complain to God when life deals you a difficult blow. To take your problem to God is to take God and your faith seriously. I trust that God can handle our complaints, and I believe that God already knows them before we air them. So there's not point in beating around the bush or being all Pollyanna like with God. The Bible is full of people who take their complaints straight to God. Moses does it today. "What am I supposed to do with these people?" Moses asks God. What am I supposed to do? Why did you do this to me, the people ask? Are you with me or against me, God, they want to know?

So these complaints and questions are fair, honest, and good. They are also profound theological questions, and questions people have been asking all throughout the ages.

Is the Lord among us, or not?

Do you remember when you first asked your own variation of this question? Because this isn't some abstract question, it's deeply personal. You might have been a teenager grieving the loss of a friend in a car accident, or grieving the loss of a grandparent to illness; or your family moving from the town of your birth and rearing to a place you did not know and where you were not known; or maybe you asked it when your parents divorced, or you experienced the break-up of a relationship, or the deterioration of one.

While we may never have experienced the threat of starvation or dehydration in the desert, many of us can identify a situation in our own lives when circumstances seemed dire, hope was lost, and we were filled with fear and anger: you have cancer, I never loved you anyway, no one will believe you, you have 30 days to vacate, you no longer have a job here.

We may be well fed, but all of us have spent time in the wilderness. We've been in that place, that awful wilderness where God seems not only distant but absent. Even those of us who have a strong faith and believe in God's gracious presence ask that question at least once in our lives. Is God among us or not? As one scholar said, "Even for those who know and accept the good news of the gospel, there can still be the wasteland of depression and the scorching sand of cancer."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hoezee

Or as Fred Craddock once said “Nobody has faith like high noon; we all have haunting questions. Why her? Why us? Why that? Why now?”<sup>2</sup>

When the Hebrews left Egypt, they thought they left all of those questions and all of their problems behind them. Slavery, bondage, and strenuous working conditions were all left in Egypt, as were all of their questions about God’s presence . . . or so they thought. With their problems and questions behind them they were headed to the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. The land where God is present and all of their haunting questions are absent.

But what they didn’t know and what they weren’t prepared for, was that they had to go through the wilderness to get there. And it became clear out there in the wilderness, where abundance was hard to see, let alone taste, that life wasn’t all fun and games. Their questions would come back to haunt them, and their faith in God’s presence would waver.

You see, when the people of Israel left Egypt, little did they know that they would move from one challenge to another challenge. And their second challenge would be harder than the first. Their first challenge was leaving, but their second challenge *was believing*.<sup>3</sup>

The people would have to learn to believe in a God that is present with them even when life is difficult, and that is hard to do. Because many people conclude that when life is difficult, God is absent. You see, we tend to believe that God equals prosperity. So, when someone is not prosperous or something bad happens, God must be absent from that situation.

But this sort of thinking reduces religion to just another utilitarian function. And when this happens, faith is just another commodity that should produce a benefit for us. There is a name for this; we call it the prosperity gospel, and it is hawked by people like Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen. The prosperity gospel believes in a God who promises to make you wealthy, healthy, and happy if you simply think positively, pray hard, and “name it and claim it”. But this makes God into a product, and if the product doesn’t deliver, there must be something defective with the product or with us.

But the Israelites were not naive or gullible. They knew people got sick in the wilderness; they saw people die in the wilderness. So they had to learn to believe in a God who does not guarantee physical protection and safety but who will lead you through it. They had to learn to put their faith and trust in that type of God; a guide who gently leads us through life’s difficulties, not one who promises us that we won’t experience them.

Nowhere in scripture does God ever promise that there will be no wilderness to traverse. Nowhere does God promise lives of ease. Nowhere does God promise us lives free from loss, or free from pain or free from disappointment. What scripture does witness to is that

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock, *Cherry Log Sermons*, p 43.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Big Yes”

God is with us in the wilderness and will lead us through it *and that God can bring life from something lifeless.*

The other night, I was reminded of all of this when reading a book to Charlotte. “Sylvester and the Magic Pebble” is a story about a donkey, Sylvester, who collects pebbles of unusual shapes and colors. One day he finds a beautiful red pebble. He soon discovers that when he holds the pebble in his hand and makes a wish, the wish comes true. “I wish it would stop raining,” he says, and it stops raining. “I wish it would be sunny,” he says, and it’s sunny. Sylvester can’t believe his luck and can’t wait to go home and tell his parents about his magic pebble.

But on his way home he encounters a mean lion. Afraid the lion is going to eat him, he blurts out, “I wish I were a rock.” And, sure enough, Sylvester turns into a rock. But rocks, of course, are lifeless. So now, with the magic pebble lying next to him on the ground, Sylvester the rock can’t pick it up and turn himself back into a donkey. So there he sits . . .all day, all night . . .

His parents are so worried. They search high and low for him, but of course, they can’t find him. He’s now a rock. Days and months pass, seasons change, and winter settles in.

Sylvester grows cold sitting out in the snow; his parents grow depressed that they’ll never see their son again. They’ve lost all hope.

When spring comes, his parents decide to go for a picnic. They miss Sylvester so much. The place where they decide to picnic is the same spot Sylvester met the lion nearly a year ago. They even set their picnic basket on top of Sylvester, the rock. Meanwhile Sylvester, who even though he is a rock, knows his parents are right there.

As they’re eating, they spot that shiny red pebble sitting on the ground next to the rock. “Look at this pebble,” they say. And picking it up, conclude that Sylvester would love it. Now, just when you’re hoping that his Mom will say “I wish Sylvester were here,” and bring him back to life, she sets the pebble down on the rock. Now, all hope is dashed.

Until Sylvester wishes he were a donkey again and the miraculous happens. . .he’s reunited with his family.

Nowhere does God promise us lives free from loss, or free from pain or free from disappointment. What scripture does witness to is that God is with us in the wilderness and will lead us through it *and that God can bring life from something lifeless.* In the Exodus story, God chooses to bring water, and the life it symbolizes, out of a rock, which is something lifeless. And when I think of that, I am reminded that 1500 or so years later, God again brought life out of something lifeless . . .and our Christian faith rests on that belief, that from death can come a resurrection. It is the foundation of our faith, and our greatest hope, that death and despair are never the final word; life and hope are the final word.

Amen.