

Alex Tiessen  
Osler Mennonite Church  
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“Is Yahweh with us or not?”

**Exodus 17:1-7; John 4: 4-26**

The lectionary texts used this morning from the book Exodus and the Gospel of John are both stories about people who are thirsty. In these passages we see stories of where water is used as a symbol to represent life, by way of communicating God’s love for God’s people. These stories are filled with people who ask questions and fail to understand the true meaning behind what is being said to them. On this, the third Sunday of Lent, we might resemble some of the folks in these scripture passages. We’re probably asking similar questions to those of the Israelites, especially in-light COVID-19 news released this week - “Is Yahweh with us or not?” When the world moves quickly we are often caught with our guard down and feel hopeless and unsure of what to do.

As we attempt to understand Jesus better through this long and dry 40 day journey of lent, and surely the days to come that are filled with uncertainty regarding health, there are times when we will feel parched. I found myself feeling quite distracted and overwhelmed this week after the COVID-19 pandemic announcement, and confess that I was not interested in the further discipline of practicing lent, but as I was preparing this morning I was reminded of that especially during times of uncertainty we are invited to keep our eyes on the cross, with the hope of Easter.

During our Lent series, we have enjoyed exploring the idea of “faith stories.” In the past I have not always appreciated being asked to share a “faith story” - as if my journey of faith has a beginning, middle, and end. Stories to me always need to have some sort of punch line to keep people interested, but I have come to understand the importance of sharing stories and how they

can be profound times of learning and growth. By sharing stories with each other about our lives, and where we experience God in them, we can learn more about God's character, while also building community. I think both of our texts this morning are "faith stories" in that they are stories that get at the heart of who God is. These stories have characters who are flawed, vulnerable, and angry, but we see in them a God whose answer is always **life**.

The story from Exodus sees the Israelite people turn against Moses and question his leadership because they are thirsty. I see a bit of humor / irony in the fact that Moses condemns the frustration of the Israelite people, but then turns to God with the same desperation: "**what am I to do with these people?**" Moses is a character in the Bible who has proven to show complete trust to God, in light of the fact that Moses does not have all the answers. Earlier stories in Exodus show Moses make decisions on blind faith. Still, I imagine that in this particular story of the Israelites, it is a time where everyone, including Moses, asked the question: "Is Yahweh with us or not?" Everyone is thirsty and wonders if they will live. It is with the staff that Moses already used to perform so many miracles, including many that involved water, that God commands Moses to strike a rock to provide water for the thirsty people.

I appreciate that in most translations of this text, the reference made to the Nile remains when referring to Moses' staff. By including it, it is a reminder of the many times Moses is associated with water before this particular story, and how water represents life. It was the Nile River where Moses' mother placed him to give him an opportunity to live, it was the Nile where Moses placed his staff, turning it to blood, representing death for the Egyptians, and the Red Sea where Moses split the waters to create a pathway to life for the oppressed Israelite people.

In our story it is significant that the water comes out of rock. Various Bible commentaries observe that God chooses to bring water -- and the life it symbolizes -- out of something that appears to be lifeless. This may be symbolic of God's intentions to bring the Israelite people life,

not death, as they suspect. Out of Egypt and out of the wilderness, God will find ways to make life flow in unexpected ways. But it does require a certain amount of trust from the people, a willingness to put faith in a God who seems not to do things in the typical way. It is noteworthy to see that even in light of the question that the Israelite people asked: **“Is Yahweh with us or not?”** God does not respond with punishment, but with and through flowing, life-giving water. Even in a time of complete doubt, God is not a god who abandons. I needed that reminded this week.

Our New Testament reading, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman marks a new point in Jesus’ ministry. He leaves the confines of traditional Judaism and turns to those whom the Jewish people considered to be outsiders and enemies: the Samaritans. Last week, Patty shared about Jesus meeting with Nicodemus. This story is different in the fact that when Jesus spoke with Nicodemus, he was speaking with a named Jewish male. When he speaks with the Samaritan woman, he speaks with an unnamed female of an enemy people.

This story is often used to reveal the nature of Jesus’ ministry. A saviour who looks out for those in the edges of society. Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink, and, though she doesn’t refuse, she wonders aloud why he would go against the social norms to ask her for a drink. As I read this alongside the Exodus text, I actually made a comparison between Moses and the Samaritan woman because they are both the ones who ask questions. In this open invitation that Jesus offers to serve him, there is hesitation. Quite obviously, I am sure it seemed quite unfair of Jesus to catch this woman so off guard and ask her for something so simple - a drink.

“What is really being asked of me?” might have been another question the Samaritan woman asked herself. Like Nicodemus, the woman in this story takes the direction from Jesus quite literally, and you could say there is a bit of a back-and-forth in the story where we see this.

After Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah to the woman she leaves behind her own water jar, shares this story with others and later in the text we read that **“many Samaritans in the town believed in Jesus on the strength of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39)**. There is a change for this woman after meeting Jesus. We see this change once her water jar is on the ground and she begins to share her story.

Jesus’ message that all are invited to drink from the “living water” that is offered in this story, resonates with the way in which the Israelite people received the water that gave them life as well. The church’s practice of washing feet and baptizing are some of the most obvious ways the church uses water to serve one another, build community, and enter a new life with Jesus. Like Moses, the Israelites, and the Samaritan woman, the church drinks, cleanses, washes each other when we are at those times in our life when we need to quench our thirst or cleanse ourselves. Water acts like a catalyst on our faith journeys. It’s a moment that represents transformation.

With all of these thoughts on water and faith stories, I decided to take a leaf out of Patty’s book and bring an item of importance that has been part of my faith journey. I brought this cigarette package. I’ve had this for about 6 years and it previously belonged to my grandpa, Jake Tiessen, who smoked most of his life. My grandpa had a long and difficult 5 year battle with cancer, ironically not caused by his smoking habit. It was a long dry season in my family’s life where we continually asked the question, “Is Yahweh with us or not?” My grandpa’s faith was best expressed in his respect and care for creation. He was an outdoors kind of guy but a person of strong faith. Most of my life I have associated the smell of cigarettes with my grandpa, both positively and negatively. In his very difficult last few days, he spent time at the hospital in our hometown. As a point of comfort during, what we knew would be, his last day, my Grandma played a tape of the Mennonite Church Manitoba Faith & Life Men’s choir. As my grandpa took

his last breath, the Hymn “Nearer my God to Thee” was playing. It was a point in my life where I felt the overwhelming presence of God, and the reassurance that Yahweh was with us, indeed. It certainly was a water from the rock type of moment. This cigarette package (with one cigarette left), at my grandpa’s bedside in the hospital, is a memory for me of that hymn and reassurance that even in our times of desperate thirst, “living water” is available.

The pitcher at the front on the altar is the reminder of the gift of water and the life it brings to our community. We are not going to have a post-sermon ritual today, just to keep ourselves healthy, but you are invited to reflect on an object of your own that may represent life, that may quench your thirst, and that might cleanse you.

Let us pray: God our caregiver, may your presence be with us as we navigate what may seem like long and dry days to come. May your living water flow through us this week and reveal your goodness. Amen.