

A FLUID SITUATION

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Exodus 17:1-7

Are you the kind of person who prefers to wear clean clothes, who likes their garments to smell like a warm spring day in the mountains? Do you throw in a dryer sheet just for that extra freshness? Do you like to wear a clean shirt every day? Do you put on fresh undies every day? If you do, that is great. You are the sort of person I want sitting next to me on a crowded plane.

However, if you are this type person, then I highly recommend that you avoid a career as an astronaut. Those people wear the same clothes day after day after day. I'm talking about the astronauts on the International Space Station—the ones who go up for weeks and months at a time. They don't have a working washing machine on the space station. They can't launder their clothes. So, what do they do? They wear every article of clothing for at least three days—often much longer. Then, they throw it all away. When the Russians send up their unmanned rockets with supplies for the space station, the astronauts fill the empty capsule with trash and their old clothes and they send it back to burn up in the atmosphere. The next time you see a shooting star, it could well be a trash bag full Fruit of the Looms falling from space.¹

So, why don't the astronauts wash their clothes? They seem rather wasteful, don't they. The answer is pretty easy. It has to do with water. In space, water is a valuable commodity.

To send stuff into space costs between \$5000 and \$10,000 per pound. Water is heavy. A gallon of water weighs over eight pounds. That is at least \$40,000 to send a gallon of water up to the International Space Station. NASA is working on alternatives, but at present it is far cheaper to send up a sack of clothes and then toss them out the airlock than it is to wash them.²

Water is vital to our own survival. The human body can survive weeks without food but only days without water. Because we know instinctively that we need water, we understand when the Israelites are in the wilderness and have no water and they demand that Moses do something and they yell at him saying, *Why did you bring us out of Egypt, [are you trying] to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?*

This story is one of several that takes place in the Old Testament's wilderness saga—the Exodus—that tells of an occasion when the people complained. They

¹ https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/why-astronauts-burn-their-dirty-underwear

² https://www.nasa.gov/vision/space/livinginspace/Astronaut_Laundry.html

complained that they didn't have water. They complained that they didn't have meat. They complained that they were tired of the food that God was giving them. They even complained that there were too many snakes.

These stories are not flattering to the Israelites. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt forced to toil at difficult tasks. God hears their cries of anguish and with the assistance of Moses, leads the people out of Egypt. They are chased by the Egyptian soldiers, but the chariots get stuck in the mud and the soldiers are drowned when the Red Sea collapses in on them. The Israelites are free to move towards the land that God has promised for them. But the going is not easy. They are in the wilderness—a harsh, nowhere place between what they were and what they will be, a journey of pain and promise. The wilderness often lacks food and water and comforts. All the people have is themselves and God. And so they push on, like their ancestor Abraham—called by God to an unknown future.

Their journey across the wilderness and come to a place known as Rephidim and they set up camp there. Why they choose this place is something of a mystery. There was no water to be found. Maybe there had been water and it dried up. We don't know, but it seems like a bad decision to establish camp without a supply of water.

Because there was no water, the people turn on Moses and demand that he produce water. Moses asks them, *Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?* Moses clearly believed they should put themselves in God's hands, that God would care for them all. Moses regarded the current lack of water as a non-issue. Moses had faith in God. But the people persisted and complained and confronted Moses, *Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?*

Moses turns to God and asks, *What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.* And God gives Moses instructions. God tells Moses to travel on ahead of the people and take with him some of the elders. Also take with him that staff he used back in Egypt—the one he used to strike the water of the Nile which turned the water to blood and killed all the fish and made the water undrinkable. God said go to the rock at Horeb and God would be waiting. Strike the rock with the staff and water will gush forth. Moses follows God's instructions and the water appears as God promised.

Moses gives that place a name. He calls it Massah and Meribah—names that sound like the Hebrew words for quarrel and test—because at that place the people *quarreled and tested the Lord*. The demanded to know, *Is the Lord among us or not?*

That is truly the question that is at the heart of this incident. The question is not 'will we die of thirst in the wilderness,' the question is whether or not God is truly present. God exists, yes, but is God watching out for us? Does God care for us? Or, do we exist as God's playthings to be moved around, to live, to die at God whim? When the people demand water, they are quarreling with God and testing God. 'Show us that you are here; show us that you care.'

This is the question that follows us around every day—Is the Lord among us or not? I wake up, I go through my day, I go to bed, I ask, “Is God with me?” If things are going well I’m probably going to say, “Sure, God is with me.” But if things are going badly, and I find that I’m in the wilderness—lost, alone, afraid—I might answer “I’m not sure if God is with me. I expected things to be better than this.”

It is, after all, the wilderness that tests us. When we are confronted by a troubling diagnosis, a job loss, the death of someone close to us, a surgery, a disability, a change we didn’t expect—any number of occasions when our soul is parched—these are our wilderness moments.

It is no accident that Jesus ventured into the wilderness to fast and pray and was tested by Satan. Satan offered Jesus anything he might want and all Jesus had to do was to deny God, to answer the question *Is God among us?* by saying “no.”

The forty days of Lent mirrors the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness. For us, Lent should be a self-imposed time in the wilderness, a time of reflection and testing, a time to practice answering yes to the question, *Is God among us?*

If you’ve ever taken a cruise, you know that the first order of business when everyone is aboard and before the ship leaves port, is for all the passengers to participate in a lifeboat drill. Everyone puts on their silly-looking life jackets and crowds into the corridors snaking toward their designated meeting spot. You then get instructed on how to load a lifeboat and get off the ship. The purpose of these drills is to teach everyone what to do in the unthinkable occasion of a calamity at sea. At home, we are used to fire drills and tornado drills and earthquake drills—all preparing for the events we hope will never happen.

One way to look at Lent is as a wilderness drill—a time to practice and prepare for the moment when we are tempted to ask, *Is the Lord among us or not?* Will we respond with a confident ‘yes’ as Jesus did or will we run around in sound and fury as did the thirsty Israelites. Do we believe that God is with us, watching for us and caring for us, or do we feel abandoned and alone?

Moses tapped the rock at Horeb and water poured forth slaking the Israelite’s burning thirst of doubt. When we find ourselves in a wilderness moment, we only need seek out God’s living water. We can find this water in the pages of scripture in the many confessions of faith and assurances of God’s presence. Our scripture is an ongoing testimony of God’s love for us. Or maybe we can find the river of living water in the many expressions of faith of those around us, in their acts of concern and compassion and love. Or maybe in worship. Or maybe in Sunday school class or a Disciples class or a Bible study. We don’t need to be thirsty. God’s living water flows all around us. It is for us the water of creation. It is the water of life. There is enough for all to drink. There is enough to bath in and become clean. There is enough for the astronauts to do their laundry.