

Hespeler, 15 March, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95:1-11, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-40

The children of Israel were tired of their journey and, you know what, I don't blame them. It is a hard thing to pass through a desolate territory. Resources are scarce. You don't know where your next meal is coming from, where you are going to be able to set up your tent or whether some wild animals might decide to invade the camp. I've gone camping before – been out in the wild and away from all of the conveniences of modern life. I've really enjoyed it – for about four days. At least for me, that was when a real weariness kicked in.

So, when the people arrived at a place called Rephidim – a green oasis in the midst of the desert – it would have immediately raised their expectations. This was just the kind of place where they could finally relax a bit – where water would be plentiful for a change and they might not have to worry for a few days. So, you can imagine how they reacted when they discovered that the spring in that place had ceased to flow. The promise of the oasis turned out to be nothing but a great boulder that loomed in the place where the spring ought to be. Now, that's got to be frustrating – to have water so near and yet so out of reach!

Now, make no mistake, that was a big problem. Access to water supplies when you are travelling in the desert is not a matter of luxury; it is a matter of survival. They had a legitimate reason to be concerned. So why did Moses get so upset with them? I think it might have something to do with how they phrased their complaint: **“Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”** they asked. The problem with that is that it is what we always do. Whenever God is leading us through some new and unfamiliar situation, and the going gets rough, we always default to what is old and familiar. It doesn't even matter whether the old thing was a good thing. In this case, they are pining for a situation where they were literal slaves!

God calls us to move forward. God calls us to take risks for the sake of the kingdom of God. Obviously, when that is the kind of thing that you are involved in, there are going to be problems. There are going to be bumps along the road and difficulties to deal with. The problem comes when our response to those difficulties is merely to look back and complain about the loss of what we were once used to. The real problem comes when our attachment to the past traps us and keeps us from embracing the opportunities that God places before us and that was what the children of Israel seem to have been doing. So I cannot help but feel that, if the church is going to find its way through whatever challenges God may be placing in front of us



today, we're going to need a better example and model than the children of Israel passing through the desert place. Fortunately, we have one.

Jesus was tired of his journey and, you know what, I don't blame him. For one thing, he was heading for Jerusalem which was the place that was so dangerous and so stressful to him that it would actually be the death of him eventually. He was also passing through a very stressful region if you happened to be a good Jew like he was. You might even say it was a cultural desert to him. He was in Samaria and Jews hated Samaritans; the feeling was mutual. So, though he was surrounded by people, he really had nothing in common with them. They might as well have spoken in a different language. But that was not the worst part. The worst part was when Jesus arrived at a place called Jacob's well, a place famous for its pure, clear water, and he couldn't drink any. The problem was not that a great boulder was blocking access to the well, but it was almost as hard to overcome: Jesus had nothing to draw water with. Now, that's got to be frustrating – to have water so near and yet so out of reach!

Now, if Jesus had just followed the example of his ancient ancestors in the wilderness at this point, what would he do? He would whine and complain about how God had brought him to this cultural wasteland so that he might die of thirst. He would talk about how this kind of thing never happened when he was back in Galilee among "civilized" people. But Jesus marked a sharp departure from that whole way of thinking. Instead, he looked around and asked himself the question, what possibilities has God placed in front of me in this place?

And that is why, when a woman came along carrying a water jar, Jesus didn't react as his ancestors would have done. He didn't say, "Well I can't talk to her because that would give her the impression that she's a human being instead of a filthy Samaritan. And I certainly mustn't give her the impression, as a woman, that she's worthy of being addressed in public by a man!" He should not have even acknowledged her existence. Is that what Jesus did? Did he define his actions in the moment by what had worked for him in the past or by the traditions that he had received? If he had done so, he would have remained thirsty and frustrated.

Now, what Jesus did say: **"Give me a drink,"** makes it sound as if Jesus is only concerned with his own needs in the moment. But think, for a moment, about how extraordinary that is. He genuinely has a need that only she can meet in that moment. How should we interpret that? Here we have the only begotten Son of the heavenly Father, the living Word of God who was a participant in the creation of the universe vulnerably acknowledging his need to this foreign woman.

That is an important part of the example Jesus gives us here because, out of his vulnerability and need, arises a whole new way of relating to a group of people who had been, up until that point, cut off from the good news that Jesus had brought. Out of that begins an entire ministry among the people of Samaria.

When the children of Israel were in the desert place and had no water, all they could think of to do was grumble and complain about how things used to be. They did, in the end, get some water, but that was it. They merely survived. When Jesus was in a cultural desert without water he took a different course and ended up not only with the water he needed to survive but some pretty amazing new opportunities for the gospel.

Which brings us, of course, to the particular desert where we find ourselves today. We are not in a literal desert, nor are we in the kind of cultural desert that Jesus found himself in that afternoon in Samaria, but we are in a desert, my friends. Let's call it a church desert.

There was a time when churches like ours – I'm talking about Presbyterian, Anglican, United, Lutheran, Catholic churches and the like – were known as *mainline* churches. It is a word that is still sometimes used to talk about such churches, but the word no longer means what it once did. What that used to mean was that those churches were plugged into the main line of the culture and society. The church had power and influence.

When, for example, the government of Canada was looking around for someone to run Indian residential schools, it was some mainline churches who stepped up, and took on those contracts in what was seen as a win-win type situation for both the church and for the government. Of course, it was anything but a win for Canada's indigenous people, but obviously that was not a really big concern at the time. So, for good and for ill, and there was a lot of ill in some circumstances like the one I just mentioned, churches had their finger on the pulse of Canadian society. We were in the main line.

But we're not really in that position anymore. For good or for ill, we find ourselves pretty much on the sidelines of culture today. And the thing is this, when you are used to being in the mainline, when you've been used to having a certain voice and a certain position that people automatically respect, when you start to lose that, it doesn't just feel like a loss of privilege. It can feel as if you're suddenly dumped out in a desert place.

When you are used to being the people who set the tone for the whole culture and you suddenly find yourself in a place where the culture doesn't much seem to care what you think, it can feel like you are in a cultural desert. And what happens then? Well, when you have depended upon your position and clout in society to get everything that you need, it can feel like you have arrived at a freshwater oasis only to discover that there is no water and you begin to worry that maybe you're not going to make it.

We all end up in that sort of situation sooner or later. The question is how will you react? Will you react like the children of Israel? Will you whine and complain about the loss and talk about how good we used to have things while we say, "Couldn't we all just go back to Egypt?" If you do that, yes, God might give you what you need to survive and muddle through. He might make the water flow from the rock, but I suspect that you will have missed out on an

incredible opportunity that God is offering you when he brings you to this desert place.

I would much rather see you do what Jesus did when he came to that well in Samaria. I think it might be more appropriate where we find ourselves today as well as more successful. What might that look like? Well, first of all I think it might mean recognizing that we are, to a certain extent, on foreign territory here. Yes, maybe at one time we were the ones who established the cultural norms in this place, that's no longer the case. We are like Jews who have wandered into Samaritan territory and it is a strange country to us. Secondly, and even more importantly, we, like Jesus, need to not be afraid to be vulnerable and ask for help in this place. When we go around pretending like we have all the answers and that nobody can tell us anything, it creates an impossible distance between us and the people who live in this place.

Jesus knew that a little bit of vulnerability can actually go a long way to create connection. In the story of Jesus and the woman by the well, it certainly creates a connection and an opportunity for deeper conversation and honestly that is what we need to have with the society around us. And it is in the midst of that conversation, after he has confessed his own need, that Jesus is able to offer to the woman what he and he alone can give and that is the living water that will quench a thirst that she maybe doesn't even know that she has.

We still have that water to offer. We have it in the words of the gospel that we can share. We have it in the faith and trust in Christ that we can model. And we have it in the supportive model of Christian community that we are called to live out. And you better believe that that living water can make a difference in people's lives that is much needed. But no one will ever get that living water from us if we are unable to have the kinds of conversations that Jesus has with that woman by the well and never forget that that conversation begins with Jesus being very tired and weary from his journey and frustrated that is not able to get the basic thing that he needs to survive and it begins with him being vulnerable to that woman and choosing to treat her, contrary to everything that he's been taught as a good Galilean Jew, as a person who has value and importance.

Friends, we are tired and thirsty wandering through some sort of desert these days. Lots of things make us feel that way. And of course it is frustrating to come to the spring and find that there is no water. But consider that perhaps God has led us to this place, that God is calling on us to engage with the strangers who live in this strange land. Will you engage with those people? Will you let your guard down, even show your vulnerability? If you do, God has some opportunities for genuine ministry that might blow your mind.