

Text: Exodus 17: 1-7
Title: Water from a Rock
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Note: I am indebted to a piece by Scott Hoezee for a central idea in this and he in turn is indebted to a commentary by Dr. Terrence Fretheim.

I remember it in my grandmother's bathroom. My grandmother ~ Winifred Amelia Smith, a matronly and pious British woman, who poured tea at the end of the table as if she were the Queen Mum ~ kept a copy of "Streams in the Desert" in the bathroom, for bathroom reading.

"Streams in the Desert" is a devotional book that was first published in 1925. It stands in something of a tie with "My Utmost for His Highest" as the most popular devotional book ever published. It was written by L.B. Cowman, the wife of a missionary who worked in Japan and China in the early 1900s. When her husband's poor health forced them to return to the United States Mrs. Cowman cared for him until his death, and then out of her experience and heartbreak came, "Streams in the Desert." The book contains a devotional reflection and a prayer or a poem for each day for a year, and although Mrs. Cowman didn't write them all she is credited with compiling this treasured collection.

"Streams in the Desert" taps into the notion that God would give water to thirsty souls ~ even through a few moments of quiet daily devotion. In reading, reflection, and prayer, God would seep in and provide
something refreshing,
something encouraging,
something sustaining.

And in that pattern of devotion ~ even through words on a page ~ you would be strengthened, drawn closer to God, and watered where you're parched.

I think it is a helpful image, for maybe you came to church this morning as a weary desert traveler hoping for an oasis, or a stream, or at least a trickle that would quench your thirst. Maybe wandered out of the desert hoping for a cup of living water, or some chicken soup for the soul, or at least a minister who would strike a rock and make something bubble up. Maybe you came hoping that something from what Karl Barth called the "the strange new world of the Bible" would seep into your spirit and spill over with hope and meaning into your world.

Diana Butler Bass wrote recently about sitting in a suburban church listening to scripture being read. In her words:

As they were read from the pulpit, I literally gasped as the stories told of a God who provides for God's people in the most trying of circumstances, that God gave food enough for the day.

As I glanced around the suburban parish, I saw plenty of worry on peoples' faces. On the surface of it, these are comfortable churchgoers. But, after the last several months of economic battering, I knew that there was anxiety enough to go around. Soaring gas prices have cut into our paychecks, falling home prices cause our concern about equity nest-eggs to pay college tuition bills, and never-ceasing cutbacks in insurance premiums are surely at the basis of our prayers for good health. Now, a stock market collapse threatened whatever money these nice Episcopalians have saved for retirement.

I know how easy it can be to poke fun at suburbanites. But these people are those who my grandmother always called, "the good Christian folks," those who have played by the rules and lived with integrity. Now they are watching their security and future disappear. I leaned over to my husband and said, "I am really glad I'm not preaching today."

Well, maybe you're here this morning longing for a drink of water
in the desert of worry and uncertainty,
or the desert of political debate,
or the desert of consumption,
or the desert of grief, or boredom, or depression, or...

Or, maybe you're here this morning simply wondering "Is God among us or not?"

Well, I don't know if I can get at anything that will quench your thirst, but I invite you to consider this text....

For, here are the liberated Israelites, stuffed with manna, but bone dry and belly aching like kids in the back seat on a long hot drive across Iowa. It is yet another story, in a series of stories, where God makes provision for his people in the wilderness. Here they need a drink, so with the same staff that
turned into a snake,
and turned the Nile into blood,
and split the Red Sea,
Moses whacks the rock and out flows liberation's libation.

Now, there are a variety of difficulties with the Exodus text. Scholars are not entirely clear about the freedom trail that the people of Israel traveled or the precise location of many of the events. They certainly didn't make a bee line from Egypt to the land of milk and honey, rather there is a skipping around from place to place that doesn't always jibe with geography and text or timing. For example, maybe more for theological clarity than geographical clarity, the writer of Exodus locates this story at the "rock at Horeb."

Horeb is the same place where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and the same place where God told Moses he would return one day with the people of Israel, and in just few short chapters it is the same place where God will give the law ~ most notably the Ten Commandments.

I suppose it is possible to read “Horeb” as a whole region that includes Sinai and there are some scholars who will point to a rock that is two stories tall with a split down the middle as the same rock that Moses smite....

But, another way to read “Horeb” is as a sort of theological short hand for the place where God meets his people and pours himself out. Horeb is holy ground where the water and the law flow out from God.

A few weeks ago, I was walking down my street, thankful to be alive and satiated by the glory of a late summer day, when I came upon a young woman standing outside a shiny muscle car with big wheels, chrome rims, and the bass of a stereo thumping so loud that it made my chest cavity vibrate. Mind you, I was just minding my own business walking home, but the young woman looked up, saw me, and with derision laughed out loud: “Oh yeah... I forgot we’re in Mayberry!”

I must have represented for her some manner of law abiding, restricted, and bound up dork. I must have looked like some befuddled buffoon who was hopelessly enslaved to the middle class.

I wondered if she thought she was more free than me.

I wondered if she embodied the idea that freedom is living without laws, doing what you want, when you want, where you want....

Damn inhibition and social constraint!

Follow whatever impulse, or hunger, or thirst....

That’s freedom!

Maybe she thought she was free....

Theologians talk about the law of God as having three “uses.” The first use of the law is as an ordering of life to God’s will. The law shows how life is supposed to work. The second use of the law is to convict us of sin. The law points out where we have fallen.

But, the third use of the law is as a guide for grateful living. The law is an expression of love; it’s an extension of grace. And, to live in the law, to live in God’s will and way, is to live in freedom. In this sense the law is a gift; it’s the source of life and wholeness and *shalom*. It not bondage, but it is in fact ~ freedom.

Dear friends, could it be that Moses striking the Rock at Horeb is some sort of foreshadow, or some manner of metaphor, for the freedom of the law that will flow at Horeb. In the words of Scott Hoezee:

....when the law of God also "flows" out from that place called Horeb, that law will likewise be a sign that God is among his people. What's more, it will mean that all things being equal, the people should eventually be able to see in that law a blessing that is every bit as much about bringing and preserving true life as are streams of water in a desert place. The water gives life, the law gives life. The water shows God's love, the law shows God's love. Whatever flows from the Rock of Horeb, whether it is water or laws, is to be seen as a sign of God's presence and blessing.

Now, I don't know if that conjures up a gusher of joy that sloshes around in your soul like a Big Gulp. I don't know if that makes you want to whoop and holler. I don't know if that seems a stretch....

But, could it be that as a free people,
as those liberated from oppression,
as a *polis* ~ the called out people of God....

We are given liturgical reminders of who we are, and whose we are, and how we got here. (Remember the ritual instructions on both sides of the Passover ~ Week 1).

And, we are given songs to sing in liberation. (Remember Miriam leading, dancing, and raising a holy racket of celebration as they sang a song of freedom ~ Week 2)

And, there is provision for the journey – enough for the day – in manna and quail. (Remember the gifts of bread and wine and fellowship ~ Week 3)

And, then there is water from a rock, the will and way of God as a guide for living that overflows with the freedom that God intended ~ the freedom for which we were created. In the chaos of the desert there is an ordering of life that leads to life.

Can we say that those gifts ~ liturgy, music, sacraments, and the law of God ~ are the provisions that God makes to sustain his liberated people?

Now, the difficulty with preaching a series out of the Old Testament is that you have to either read Jesus back into the text, or see in the text something that
points to,
or prepares for,
or is prophetic about,
or proclaims....

So, this morning, as those who are united with Christ,
as those who find encouragement, comfort, common sharing, tenderness or compassion...

We proclaim that Jesus is the embodiment, the full expression....
of the liberating lamb of Passover,
and the bread of life,
and the living water,
and the fulfillment of the law.

Dear people of God in Jesus Christ you are free!
And he has made provision for your liberating journey.
Thanks be to God. Amen.