

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
March 15, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7

This Third Sunday in Lent, our reading from the Old Testament book of Exodus takes us into the wilderness, where the people of God have fled following their escape from generations of slavery in Egypt. We might expect to find them celebrating their liberation or offering elaborate thanksgiving to God for Pharaoh's overthrow. But, instead, they are tense and angry, on the verge of becoming an ugly mob. From Exodus, Chapter 17, beginning with the 1st verse:

¹From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

You would think escape from the tyranny of Egypt would have been enough: the prospect of freedom and dignity, of their own promised land of milk and honey. But, you see, the road from bondage to liberty passes through the wilderness. The wilderness is wild and seemingly empty, devoid of comforts and even life's basic necessities. There is no water! As thirst intensifies, the Israelites take their complaint straight to the top, to Moses, and cry out against the leader who delivered them to this new land. Moses tells them that it is God whom they are putting to the test, although I imagine Moses himself has his doubts and the people can see that he is worried. The crowd's fear threatens to become panic and mutiny.

Moses, too, is filled with fear and anger at God. Moses is in jeopardy because God has not acted. Moses is beginning to notice that the God of the exodus isn't some great "sugar daddy" who supplies upon demand all the desires and yearnings of the people of Israel.¹ After the succession of divine miracles in Egypt, not to mention the parting of the Red Sea, Moses may have figured God could calm the people down simply

¹ Walter Brueggemann et al, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary, Based on the NRSV, Vol. 1: Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 201.

by creating an oasis in their path. Instead, God’s response to Moses’s prayers for help is to offer leadership advice: “Take the elders, and when you come to the rock at Horeb strike it with your staff.” Not very reassuring, especially when you have a thirsty, angry mob at your door. “Go pound on a stone.” A stone? A stone when you’re looking for water? “Strike it and water will come out.”

On the surface, this does sound like a ludicrous idea—to head for a stone when looking for water. But there is more in the statement than just meets the eye. When God commands Moses to go, there is also reassurance that God will be with him, that Moses and the elders will not travel alone. It is God who will work through the rod as it strikes. So Moses proceeds. They arrive at Horeb. He strikes the stone, and lo and behold there is water.

It seems like we have entered a wilderness of our own this past week. We may not be out of water, but toilet paper and hand sanitizer at least are in very short supply. The way forward is unclear and not a little frightening. The only thing we know for sure is that there will be more sickness and death ahead. And that business as usual has been suspended, although for how long is anyone’s guess. It’s too early to tell. This could be very bad, or not as bad as we think.

You are hearing or reading this sermon by yourself, I imagine, within your six-foot radius of social distancing. For the first time in memory, Union Church, like thousands of other churches and synagogues nationwide, has suspended corporate worship for the next three Sundays to minimize the opportunity for the coronavirus to spread among us as we gather. It is not a step your church leaders have taken lightly. Yet public health officials have made it clear that staying away from each other is our best hope of “flattening the curve” of the infection’s spread, which we need to do if the health care system is to have any chance of coping with the sickness to come. And, as usual, it is the most vulnerable among us who are at the greatest risk. As Christians, we are called to care for the least of these.

We are all in this together. That’s the paradox. To mitigate, we must collaborate. To collaborate, we must separate. But we can’t afford to let physical separation become mental isolation. Now, more than ever, we need to be conscious of our common humanity and mutual inter-dependence. We followers of Jesus are well positioned to take a lead in this regard. Ironically, it was a Jewish rabbi in Los Angeles the other day who spelled this out.

“The very last thing we need right now is a *mindset* of mutual distancing,” the rabbi wrote. “We actually need to be thinking in the exact opposite way. Every hand that we don’t shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another must become a thought as to how we might help that other, should the need arise.”

He concluded by saying: “Let’s stay safe. And let’s draw one another closer in a way that we’ve never done before.”²

² Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, cited in Dan Zak, “Coronavirus is a test that no one knows how to pass,” *The Washington Post*, March 13, 2020.

Like it or not, we have all gone through a radical change in the past few days. Change brings fear. Change brings grief from letting go of the way things were. Those Hebrews in the wilderness were reeling from change, without water, far from the home they had known in Egypt. They were angry and bitter. Moses was at his wit's end. What does he do? He cries out in desperation and frustration, possibly some anger. In that cry, he relinquishes the people's complaints to God, lets them go. Whether out of pure faith or weariness, Moses throws up his hands, trusts, and stops to listen. Trusting God when we feel despairingly helpless means admitting that we are not in control. This is a hard and a liberating choice. How do we cope in the tough times? By admitting that the abundant Spirit of God is ultimately in control. Like Moses, our actions are to stop, trust and listen.

How does God respond? With criticism or ridicule or impatience? No, God, who has already saved these forgetful people time and again, responds calmly. God is not stressed with the people's continued complaints. God responds with seemingly simple instructions. Go to the place I will show you. I will be there. Strike a rock. There will be water.

These are not logical instructions. Following these instructions requires acting on faith rather than fact. However, the fact is that faith can be acted on, because Moses will use the rod that struck the Nile as the people were liberated from Egypt. The rod is a sign of God's presence that Moses carries with him. It is tried and true. Following on faith when it seems there are but scanty facts is the discipleship of trust. Moses follows. The people follow. There is water. The water is a mirror of who God really is. God is love, abundance, forgiveness, providence.

How we see God is a direct reflection of how we see ourselves. If God brings to mind mostly fear and blame, it means there is too much fear and blame welled inside us. If we see God as full of love and compassion, so are we. How we mirror God is also how we see God.

The Hebrew people in the desert saw God through the lens of fear and blame. They assumed that God was out to get them. Yet God, in steadfast love and faithfulness, responds to their complaints and doubts in the midst of their fear with water to keep them alive. God mirrors back redemption instead of condemnation. What a miracle! How are we to mirror God in our world, in these times of fear and confusion?

I call on us today to let go of our stress, worry, judgment and complaint. Relinquish them to God in trust! This time shall pass and no matter how difficult it proves to be, God will be there with us in steadfast love and faithfulness. As we cling to that knowledge, let our words and actions show forth that divine image in which we are made.

All to God's glory and honor and praise. Amen.