



Central Peninsula Church

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Exodus 17:1-7
Numbers 20:1-13
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The Way, The Whole Way, and Nothing But The Way

“My bath was too hot, I got soap in my eyes, my marble went down the drain, and I had to wear my railroad-train pajamas. I hate my railroad-train pajamas. When I went to bed Nick took back the pillow he said I could keep and the Mickey Mouse night light burned out and I bit my tongue. The cat wants to sleep with Anthony, not with me. It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My mom says some days are like that. Even in Australia.” And so ends the heartwarming tale of *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Do any of you like to complain? What am I saying?! It’s as American as Oscar the Grouch or Jerry Seinfeld! It’s easy to complain - almost addictive even - especially over the holidays. “It’s too rainy, too windy, too much shopping, not enough. Not enough family time or maybe too much!” Daunting resolutions for this New Year or depressing failures from the last one.

But why? Why do you, like me, find it so easy to grumble? I think it’s because, to quote Alexander’s mom, “some days are like that.” Things frequently don’t go our way, and our way must be the best, right? Of course sitting in church most of us agree that that’s not really the case, but in the heat of the moment it’s easy to slip into that mindset. And so it was with the Israelites. Talk about the heat of the moment! They had just changed neighborhoods from shady homes in big city Egypt to the barren desert. Their plan? Have God ride roughshod over fields and Pharaohs straight into the glorious Promised Land. God’s plan? A slightly different way, so let the grumbling begin. Turn with me now to Exodus, chapter 17 verse 1.

I. Exodus 17.

“Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the Lord, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water that we may drink.’ And Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?’ But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, ‘Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’ So Moses cried out to the

Lord saying, ‘What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me!’” (v. 1-4).

A. Despite God’s past provision Israel still complained. If any of you know me you know that I love my beverages. Most of the time you run into me I’ll have an extra large this or super-size that in my hand, so part of me completely understands their frustration/fears/complaints. But we mustn’t ignore the events which led up to that. Only five chapters back, in Exodus 12, God sent the Ten Plagues (actually called “miracles” in the text) and provided freedom from their Egyptian captivity. In Exodus 14, with Pharaoh’s army hot on their heels, God made a way right through the Red Sea. Lacking Mapquest and Hummers, they continued to follow God’s way home via pillar of smoke and fire. And in the chapter just prior to our text this morning (Exodus 16), God provided food for them every day in the form of bread-like Manna and quail. Watch for that this morning. God repeatedly shows his people the way, yet time and time again they just asked him to hand over the map! God provided for their every need, but they still complained about the service.

B. Moses trusted in God’s provision. Now let’s be fair and give the Israelites the benefit of the doubt. They’d probably run out of their water supplies already and had been pressing on for quite some time, days even. They were pushing hard for Rephidim, knowing that they could count on a spring there. But it says in 17:1, **“there was no water for the people to drink”** and it’s a pretty good bet that they assumed God was just as shocked by this predicament as they were. And such a mistake would easily prove fatal in the desert. So the Israelites, verse 7 says, **“tested God,”** and gave him a failing grade. But while everyone was confused and concerned, not everyone gave up on God. You see, Moses fell before God and said, “I don’t understand this assignment, Lord. Help! Please.” Even though God’s way wasn’t clear or easy, Moses knew God’s way was the only way.

C. God demonstrated his undeserved love by providing water from rock. So God let those ungrateful Israelites dry out and die like leaves, right? You’ve got to admit that sometimes we wish he had. But no, God paints us an amazing picture of his perfect, underserved

lovingkindness. Once again, God provides a way out of no way for his obstinate people - water out of a rock.

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.’ And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel” (17:5-6).

That’s grace! But why all the fanfare? God didn’t need to prove his love to them or us. Why didn’t he just bring rain or revive the spring? I think, no, I’m certain, that God was doing something bigger here to quench their thirsty souls much more than their mouths. And it all began with their endless complaining.

D. Exodus 17 is actually a court hearing.

1. Israel put God on trial. Though we can joke now about the incessant whining of the Israelites, their grumbling was no laughing matter. In actuality the Hebrew word for “quarrel” (ruv) just as easily refers to the legal act of “filing a charge” or “pleading a case” against someone. Of course, without Judge Judy or black robes or an armed bailiff this may be hard for some of us to imagine, but look again with me at what seems to be an actual trial rivaling anything Judge Judy ever dreamed of.

A wise man once said, “If it looks like a duck and walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s probably a duck.” I’m about as far from a lawyer as you can get, but it seems to me that all the proper language is right here to hold court. You be the judge. In vv.5,6 “elders” were the judge/jury of that day; “stoning” (v.4) was not vigilante justice, as we often suppose, but a legislated penalty for serious criminals; and the judges “rod” or “staff” (v.5) served in Old Testament courtrooms as well to meet out lesser punishments (I guess they didn’t have my mom’s wooden spoon!). And (v.6) you’ve probably seen or heard how the accused “stands before” the fierce examination of the prosecution. Can you see it? But what about the defendant? Can you figure out who’s on trial here? No, it’s not Moses, it’s God!

2. God took the punishment for Israel’s sin. The Israelites were mad. They wanted to see heads roll. The buck stopped with their leader, Moses, right? No. The buck stopped with God. And

hearing Moses’ desperate cry, God said to the angry crowd, “You want to hang someone? Hang me! Put your jury here. I’ll stand there before you on the rock. And bring a rope!” Israel must have sat in horror as Moses took that staff, the same staff that parted the Red Sea, the same staff that turned the Nile to blood. Moses took that staff and raised it to strike the very presence of their living God. CRACK! Instead of the world coming to an end, they saw life-giving water flowing from the rock. Instead of a nation coming to an end, God took on the punishment the Israelites deserved and offered life, instead. There’s a familiar ring to that isn’t there? How clearly this points ahead to the final, ultimate sacrifice Christ made - dying for our sins so that we wouldn’t have to.

3. Scripture points to the rock as an appropriate symbol. Wow. Pretty cool, eh? Ok, I know, it’s a lot to consider. In fact, I think it’s wise and Biblical to challenge and question new or unusual interpretations. I’ve heard way too many people read way too much into the symbols and stories of Scripture. We shouldn’t ever just pick and choose what we’d like the Bible to say; however, in this case the Bible itself highlights the uniqueness of this rock. A good 2,000 years after the fact the Apostle Paul studied these stories and concluded that “...all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.” From their limited vantage point, the Israelites would have seen that rock as “God” (see also did: Deut 32; Ps 18:2; 31:3; 42:9; Jn 7:38; 4:10-15). In hindsight Paul saw that rock as an intentional symbol/shadow of Jesus Christ who willingly faced the underserved, fatal consequences of all our sins. And like any other solid rock, this Rock is as unshakable as it is loving. For Paul also said “...I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers; nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:36-37).

II. Numbers 20.

A. Despite God’s past provision (in same situation), Israel complained. Sounds like a story worth remembering, doesn’t it? High drama, cool plot twist, a hero, one great moral, and a happy ending - or was it so happy? To answer that you’ll need to take a little journey of your own with me to find the book of Numbers, chapter 20, verses 1 to 8. This is in effect, the sequel to Exodus 17,

“Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin, in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh. Now Miriam died there and was buried there. And there was no water for the congregation; and they

assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, 'If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why then have you brought the Lord's assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? And why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us into this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink.' Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting, and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the Lord appeared to them; and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.'"

B. Moses kept from entering the Promised Land.

While the date of this story is different - a entire generation later - everything else seems to have stayed pretty much the same. Same thirst. Same complaining. Same blaming. Same gracious plan, water from a rock. But here's where the similarities end. Pay close attention to Moses' actions and God's response,

"So Moses took the rod from before the Lord, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, 'Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.' Those were the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the Lord, and He proved Himself holy among them" (vv.9-13).

C. Moses' punishment in Numbers 20 only makes sense in light of Exodus 17. Next to the stumbling, grumbling Israelites, don't God's charges against Moses seem a little trumped up: "not believing God or treating Him as holy?" Haven't you ever wondered why God let the Israelites off the hook time and time again, but Moses loses his temper once and he's kept out of the Promised Land? Doesn't it almost sound like the good kid who finally retaliates one time against the school bully and gets suspended for it? It might surprise you, but I'm hoping a closer look at our texts will reveal that God actually took it easy on Moses.

1. He didn't trust God. God's chosen people grabbed the hot stove once before and they're stretching out their hand for another go at it. Moses, like an impatient Jonah refusing to forgive those sinful, underserving Ninevites, decided that he should deal with the Israelites his way this time. He knew better than God. He knew that these thick-headed Israelites had finally tapped out God's gracious love this time. That was Mistake #1 for Moses: No one and nothing can stop up the flow of God's love for his people.

2. He didn't obey. Mistake #2: He said, "You bet I'll speak, but not to that rock!" Moses clearly disobeyed God's simple instructions, and spoke to the people rather than the rock. Let me give you a hint. Life is complicated. When God gives you clear direction, do it!

3. He did blaspheme. Mistake #3: Moses hit that rock "a second time." Yes, you heard me right. I've become convinced that the word usually translated as "twice" in verse 11 (pa'am) can just as easily mean "again" or "a second time." What does that matter? Think back to the scene in Exodus 17 - what happened there is intimately connected with what happened here. It's likely not a trial this time, but the amazing trial and truth from Exodus 17 seem to have been forgotten or ignored. The difference between Moses hitting the rock "twice" or "a second time" may be one small word but it carried one enormous implication, that God's initial sacrifice was not enough. Ouch!! And this message that Moses sent would not have been lost on the Israelites and least of all God. This was more than mere disobedience, it was nearly blasphemy. Moses suggested that the saving grace of God was not sufficient for all who seek it. That's enough to keep even him on this side of the River Jordan.

III. God's love never runs out.

Now hold on. If we're not careful here, it would be easy to gather precisely the wrong meaning from these stories, the scary notion that if we blow it badly enough or enough times, God will eventually cut us off from his promises. But relax! This morning's message is a message of God's amazing grace, not our amazing guilt.

The truth of the matter is that God never withheld his love, even from Moses. Of course he did require Moses to face real consequences for his real sins, but God also required that he, God alone, would have the honor of burying his faithful servant. What is

more, if you look, you will find Moses forever listed among the most prestigious names of the “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11. Despite his failings, Moses thirsted for God. And God’s saving love quenches all who thirst. There is never a limit to such love, only sometimes a person’s unwillingness to accept it. God forgave the biggest, most blatant sins of Moses and Israel and he’ll forgive ours as well! Such love never ceases to flow as long as we’re thirsty.

A. We are just as prone to grumble as the Israelites. Speaking of thirsting... I got peed on the other day! Maybe this isn’t so new to you but it was to me. It was the day of our staff Christmas party and I had my son Toby on my lap. He’s been doing really well at using “the potty,” but I’ve got a newsflash for you: lots of apple juice and lots of tickling is a bad combination! Still, as mad as I was and as disobedient as he was (and really gross), I never stopped loving my Toby and I never will. How much more is God our Father’s love for us? I don’t know about you, but I need every last ounce of it. Despite God’s perfect and loving plans, my grumbling gives even the Israelites a run for their money! Don’t we tend to give up all too easily on his direction and instruction for our careers or education, for our families or marriages, for our addictions or recovery? We know what is good and right, but that’s not so easy or popular, and we steal the reins away from God. It’s so hard to trust and so easy to control. Or we grumble and squirm, buried under the guilt of our sin and disobedience. Do you ever sit in church or at home or at school worrying that nothing you can do or say will set things right with God? It’s true! We can’t do anything. But flail or flourish, sin or submit, God’s saving love will always quench all who thirst.

B. How to get thirsty. “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” True, but you can make him thirsty. That’s what God wants from us. Don’t focus on doing and controlling and distrusting; focus on thirsting. Our texts leave us with some rather simple, but rather serious suggestions. And you “doers” might be disappointed because these have far more to do with God’s faithfulness than self-righteousness.

1. First of all, enjoy the Word. How small and boring would our world be if Isaac Newton hadn’t thought “why?” or Columbus hadn’t wondered “where?” or NASA hadn’t said “how?” We all see the value in asking “why?” and “how come?” in this world. Should it be any less true for the very Word, God’s

Word, that gives our world meaning? Enjoy the Word. Dig deep into the depths of the riches of Scripture. Over and over, God reveals to us that there is as much discovery and depth as we will seek. I hope this new insight into Exodus and Numbers gives you at least that this morning. Start exploring and studying the Word. Discuss it with your community groups and your spouses or your pastors. Read a commentary. Consider the Leadership Training program. Enroll in a seminary class. “The Word is your oyster!” Enjoy it.

2. Second, enjoy the water. Everyone knows that when it all comes down, there’s nothing more refreshing than water. Mixing barrow after barrow of concrete beneath a midday, Mexican sun, I can tell you that an ice cold Coke is nice, but water is what you need. And our parched souls need God’s saving love. God poured out both physical and spiritual water to the Israelites from that rock. And he poured it out to them and us freely and forever. Don’t settle for vain substitutes like things or achievements or self-righteousness. Only God’s water is love and grace. Enjoy it.

3. Finally, enjoy the wait. Kristin and I and Toby and Karis sailed to Angel Island the other day for what was supposed to be a relaxing two-day getaway. Get there, tie off, soak up the sun and the island. Instead the engine was sputtering, the “parking” was lacking, and our plan was quickly failing. Come 7 p.m. we limped slowly back home, hoisting sails in the dark when the engine wouldn’t cooperate. You know what? It was great! In fact I’m sure we had a better time heading back and forth than actually getting there. I guess that makes me a “journey” kind of guy.

It’s the journey, not the destination. Have you heard that expression? I enjoy going there more than being there, the experience more than the endpoint. This theme is unmistakable in the Israelite’s Exodus from Egypt. Like it or not, God has a plan and it is a good one. So wait on him. Give him the wheel and enjoy the ride. Release control. If you must do something, can you just do that? Can you give God your trust? Can you trust that his way is love without condition, without end? Whether it’s for the first time or the five-hundredth time, I hope you’ve finally seen this morning that God’s love will always quench all who thirst.

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