

Exodus 17:1-7

From 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. **2** The 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?" **3** But 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?" **4** So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." **5** The 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. **6** I 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. **7** He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

The wilderness that Israel discovered on the other side of the Red Sea was a desert, and Exodus 15 gives a first indication of the peoples' new plight. Verses 22-27 of that chapter alert us to a pattern repeated in today's reading, Israel's need of sustenance in the wilderness. Three days into their journey, the only water they found was bitter. As in today's reading, the people complained, and God, through Moses, provided the remedy: he threw a piece of wood into the water that made it sweet. That event rightly qualifies as a miracle, unexplainable by laws of nature, and it came with a test:

"If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD who heals you." Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water (26-7).

After this assurance from God, and a stay at an oasis, their next set of complaints was answered with manna from heaven (chapter 16). Bread and water. God provided the essentials to sustain life. Yet the abundance they enjoyed was short-lived; at the next stop, there was no water. This time, God arranges a meeting. A delegation goes with Moses to meet God at the mountain. There is no water, not even bitter water to transform this time. Instead, Moses strikes the rock with the same staff he had used to pollute the Nile.

What is different about this second thirst? There was no water to strike, only a rock, but one from which living water flows. And unlike the brackish water made sweet, this water is already present. Drive along a roadway that has been cut from rocky terrain and you see wet streams (and in winter, the frozen springs) where water flows from the outcroppings. Water is present in these rocks, just as it was for the people of Israel.

What do we make of this shift from the miraculous transformation of the water in chapter 15 to the revelation of a source of life already present, that only needed to be discovered? The shift highlights Israel's rising expectations: daily deliveries of manna and quail failed to convince them just as brackish water made sweet failed to assure them of their covenantal relationship with God — a few chapters before they receive the Ten Commandments.

Could the people of Israel have discovered these cataracts of water — of life and promise — in the rocks by themselves? We know, at least, that the water was already there, waiting. Yet instead of exploring their new surroundings, the people turn instinctively to the wrong human remedies: stoning Moses would have left them thirsty and without a leader. The reminder is powerful at a time when we feel ourselves in a wilderness new to us, without the fellowship or communion that the church provides. We need to be resourceful — and we have the resources. We have the assurance that the Lord is among us, even when our easy access to the manna of Christ's body and the living waters of baptism have been restricted. Moses called the place Test and Quarrel as a reminder of this time and a warning not to repeat it. When these elements are transformed for us into the living waters of our baptism and the bread of communion, we seek them, not with grumbling or tests, but as part of our exploration and delight in the resources God has abundantly provided.

Let us pray, Lord God, our wanderings take us to places where we have difficulties discerning our path, nourishing ourselves spiritually, and finding the life-giving food and water we need. Help us to discover the precious resources you have provided us for this journey, for we trust that we are your people and that you are indeed among us.