

Exodus 17:1-7

17:1 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.

17:2 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?"

17:3 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?"

17:4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

17:5 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.

17:6 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.

17:7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Philippians 2:1-13

2:1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,

2:2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

2:3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

2:4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

2:6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

2:7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,

2:8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

2:10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

2:11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

2:12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

2:13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Proclamation of the Word

Many weeks during worship when we send our children back to seats or out the door we pray a prayer:

Dear God, we thank you for this day. For loving us in every way.

Help us to love and not to fuss, because we know you love us.

Help us to love and not to fuss...the Bible is full of fussin' , as we say in the South. If you have ever been on a long road trip with your family, maybe you understand. Everyone settles in and enjoys the road for a while....eventually the fussin' starts...mom, he's touching me...how much farther???....I gotta go...parents in the front seat grit their teeth and turn up the music. Long trips can be a breeding ground for fussin'.

Our ancestors in the Exodus reading are doing it again. Thirsty and tired, they are actually quarreling among themselves and looking for water. They are turning up empty and starting to lose patience with each other, their leader Moses, and their God Yahweh. And that is when the fussin' starts.

The Israelite children wandering in the wild are trying to figure out what freedom and faith is. They remember back in Elim (Exodus 16) where there had been an oasis in the wilderness with Palm trees and 12 springs of water a plenty. They were only 6 weeks into their journey then. They are more tired now. They have been surviving off of quail and manna, just enough for their daily bread. Elim seemed like a fantasy now...like a brief resort vacation, but now you are back at work and the emails, the demands have stacked up and it seems that everyone is complaining about something.

It looks like their plight is hopeless. They are lost. All they can see is dirt and rocks ahead.

Have you ever been in the wilderness? feeling lost, hopeless, and all you can see is dirt and rocks.

This has been a strange week of loss and confusion for the Clemson community upon the death of Tucker Hipps. I can only imagine the grief, the suffering of his parents and friends. It is a time of lament, of crying out, of asking questions. So many questions.....How? Why? What if? That is what we do in the wilderness. The Israelites question sounds strangely real, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Maybe you have had wilderness wanderings and wonderings. Is the LORD among us or not?

Sometimes when things get tough, we start doubting if it will ever get better. We feel the stress and anguish of this moment, this day. We start to wonder if God's provision will ever arrive. Will there be refreshment? Where is the living water?

But what about seeing God evident when things are going well, when life is comfortable? Do we just notice God when things are tough and rocky?

"...the people seem to focus on God's need to act when there's no water, but seemed to take the water for granted when it was plentiful in the past. ... In fact, in Exodus 15:27, just before the manna

story, the Israelites spent time in "Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water." The spare narrative about that comfortable part of the journey doesn't mention any conversation about God's care or Moses' leadership when things were going well,"ⁱ writes Kathryn Huey.

In Friday's New York Times writer Julia Baird discusses that the Archbishop of Canterbury has come out admitting that he has doubts sometimes. She writes in her op-ed piece entitled, *Doubt as a Sign of Faith*,

He told an audience at Bristol Cathedral that there were moments where he wondered, "Is there a God? Where is God?" Then, asked specifically if he harbored doubts, he responded, "It is a really good question. ... The other day I was praying over something as I was running, and I ended up saying to God, 'Look, this is all very well, but isn't it about time you did something, if you're there?' Which is probably not what the archbishop of Canterbury should say."

That sounds a lot like "Is the LORD among us or not?"

But some jumped on it. An London Atheist columnist declares, "VICTORY," a Muslim scholar tweets, "I cannot believe this."

Julia Baird writes:ⁱⁱ

But Archbishop Welby's candor only makes him human. He may lead 80 million Anglicans worldwide, but he is also a man who knows anguish, rage, incomprehension and the cold bareness of grief. He lost his firstborn child, Johanna, a 7-month-old baby girl, in a car accident in 1983, a period he has described as "utter agony." As a teenager he cared for an alcoholic father. When explaining his thoughts on doubt, he referred to the mournful Psalm 88, which describes the despair of a man who has lost all of his friends and cries out, "Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?" The psalm reads bleakly: "Darkness is my closest friend."

Faith cannot block out darkness, or doubt. When on the cross, Jesus did not cry out "Here I come!" but "My God, why have you forsaken me?" His disciples brimmed with doubts and misgivings.

Just as courage is persisting in the face of fear, so faith is persisting in the presence of doubt.

Perhaps you, too, have known such faith and doubt. Faith is not the same thing as certainty. It is trust in God in spite of it.

Perhaps, when life is tough and we have need there is finally room for reliance on God. When we are empty, spare, down to the bare essentials, stripped away, there is room in our lives to notice God. And let's face it, most of us are not scrounging for daily bread and clean water. Our lives are so full, that we can go a long time without knowing need or feeling empty. In fact, for so many life is over-filled- too full of work, too full of stress, too full of distraction and entertainment. Many of us are dealing with

the opposite of the Israelites' spare, stripped-down existence. We are quarreling and fussin' because our lives are stretched too thin and our mouths and our schedules are so full. As my kids would say, #firstworldproblems.

I searched #firstworldproblems on Twitter and here are a couple of examples:

1. When your favorite football teams all play at the same time (cry face)
2. my iphone6+ is too big to fit in my current jeans, so now I have to buy all new pairs

I am always amazed when I have taken mission trips with church groups how refreshing and exhausted we feel at the end of the week. Some stripping down of life to simply basic needs is not only good for perspective, it is good for the soul. I have noticed it changes my prayers. Instead of praying for relief from an overstressed life, I pray:

Thank you God for children who laugh. Thank you God for shelter from the rain. Thank you God for this simple food offered by generous hearts from a family who make less money in a year than I do in a week. Thank you for meaningful work. Thank you God for these witnesses who love you and trust you with such strong faith.

Stripped away.

I am not suggesting that church mission trips be therapy from our first world problems, but sometimes God works in us even when we seek to serve Christ and all his children. New life bursts forth in the wilderness. When it all looks like dirt and rocks with no hope for rain, the rock is struck and living water gushes out. There are springs in the desert. The LORD is among us. In fact, the LORD never not left us.

Sometimes the reality of a devastating tragedy can overwhelm us. Other times, our lives were too overstuffed, overfed, overstressed to notice God's sustenance. But, we can go to the fount of every blessing. We can find consolation and hope, but you don't have to go to a third world country to find God present. We can seek God who is already present. And Paul's letter to the Philippi church reminds us that the fullness of God is in Jesus Christ. Jesus is "God with us," Emmanuel. Listen again to these words:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

God poured out his own life. When we are "in Christ" there is new attitude of humility and trust that even though we do not yet see it, a stream will spring forth from the desert and water will come from

the rock. Through compassion, sympathy, and love of the Christian community, we can find consolation and even complete joy. When we know Jesus, who is God in the flesh, present among us through the power of the Holy Spirit, we know we are not alone. He who became empty is with us in our emptiness. He would took on the form of a servant, came to show us the way to serve.

Sometimes we want to skip over the rocks and get to the living water gushing out, but our faith is honest about the rocks. Even Jesus suffered and died a horrible death. Even the heart of God knows the depths of our suffering and emptiness. But death is not the final word, for he overcame death and the grave. The wilderness full of rocks and dirt was not the final reality, but living water sprang forth. God is with us!

Our daily devotional booklets, *These Days*, had this excerpt by Julie Peeples ⁱⁱⁱthis week:

The God who made streams come forth from hard stones in the wilderness brings forth hope in the most unlikely places. A sanctuary can become a place where loneliness ends. A coffee shop can become a place of reconciliation. A waiting room can be transformed into a community. One never knows when a cold, hard stone might actually hold the waters of life. What situation in your life, family, congregation or community appears hopeless? What might change if you assume God is at work there?

The LORD is among us and living water of new life will come from a rock. That is a promise we can trust. This is the good news of the gospel! Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Kathleen Matthews Huey, God Sustaining Presence, at SAMUEL <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/september-28-2014.html>

ⁱⁱ *Julia Baird is an author, a journalist and a television presenter with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. She is working on a biography of Queen Victoria.* A version of this op-ed appears in print on September 26, 2014, on page A31 of the New York edition with the headline: Doubt as a Sign of Faith. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/opinion/julia-baird-doubt-as-a-sign-of-faith.html?_r=0

ⁱⁱⁱ Julie Peeples, *These Days* Devotional July, August, September.