

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

Elizabeth Bloch
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Lent 3
Year A

(Where do you get that living water?)

The people pitching camp in the Sinai wilderness were thirsty; and they complained resentfully to Moses. Yes, he had liberated them from Egypt, but they were finding their dream of liberation more difficult to enjoy than they had imagined it would be, back in the days of their slavery, when at least food and water had been provided for them. In their weariness and bitterness and disappointment with themselves and each other, they turn the blame and the burden of their complaint toward Moses, of course. He was their leader.

*So, why did you bring us out of Egypt, then - to kill us with thirst?... and the Lord said to Moses: "I will be there on the rock at Horeb. Strike the **rock**, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."*

God's people in Israel thought a lot about water. Almost all the stories they told and retold were around their relationship to water. Their history was really all about water. We hear so much about their journeys in the wilderness that they can become a fairy tale kind of setting in our imaginations. But, for the people of Israel, the wilderness was not imaginary and not a fairy tale. It was their route between waters, the journey they had to make between the slavery of civilizations that were supported by rivers to their dream of independence: the promise of a land supported by rain.

It didn't matter whether the river was the Nile of Egypt or the Tigris and Euphrates. Whatever the river's name might be, the managing of these vast river empires and their floods was so highly labor intensive that it led to slavery. And the tiny nation of Israel was such easy prey to the might of Assyria or Egypt; it was virtually tossed back and forth between those two great powers as they struggled through the centuries for dominance... Really, Israel's few days of glory and peace and independence only happened when the empires of Egypt and Babylonia were occupied with other, more pressing, business.

The favorite story of Noah's Ark was their story of a beloved homeland where the promise of reliable seasonal rains meant farming and shepherding and independence – everything they had longed for in all their collective memory. Temperate seasons allowed Sabbath and rest times, and the possibility of living and working and supporting life without the need for slavery or a mighty economy or military force. Seasonal rains *were* the promise of the promised land.

Because of their history and their geography, God's people in Israel understood the power of water in ways we can only begin to imagine. Water - *who* controlled it and *how* it was controlled – determined the whole of their identity as a people. River water meant they were living as slaves. Rainwater meant they were free. Their life, their living, how others defined them, how they defined themselves, were all subject to the relentless economic game of catch between their rich and powerful neighbors.

And in between Egypt and the promised land was desert. And in between Babylon and the promised land was desert. In between their nightmares and their sweetest dreams was the wilderness. There was no other way to get from one place to the other, even when those who

enslaved them would let them go. The wilderness, with no water and no life, was the land of Israel's journeys, where she never wanted to be, and which, of course, she would have liked to bypass – as do we all. The Hebrew scriptures make it clear over and over again that into that desert in between – into that wilderness where Israel never wanted to be - God wooed her time after time with longing for the promised land.

And even though Israel kept thinking that what was most important to her was whether her water source was river or rain, the stories of scripture – the stories that tell us who Israel was really created to be - *all* take place in the desert, where there was no water at all.

There in the wilderness - stuck between the promise and the promised land - there in the wilderness Israel would remember that God was really her oasis, God was the Rock of her salvation – her saving and healing - the rock at Horeb that would provide the water of life. It was in the wilderness, generation after generation, story after story, that Israel fought and fell in love again with her God, a God whose self-definition was Water-Source. There in the wilderness they knew that the water – the source of life – was unmistakably the **gift of God**.

Today in John's Gospel, Jesus says to the woman at Jacob's ancient well: *If you knew the **gift of God**, you would have asked for living water.*

And the woman said to him: Where do I get that living water? Where do I get that living water so that I need never be thirsty? In one way or another, that is always the question – Israel's, the Samaritan woman's, and ours. Where do we get that living water- the water of life?

We get it, I believe, in the same place Israel found it: we get it in the wilderness. Perhaps that is one of the very best reasons for making a Lenten journey. Lent is meant to be a kind of wilderness experience. Some of us may be in a wilderness right now, wandering in what feels like a desert between the river place and the rain place of our life's dreams. How many of us feel like Israel, inexorably tossed between the people and powers and situations around us which so easily seem to overwhelm our weakness? How many of us feel stuck on a journey between the promise and the dream of the promised land we think would be the answer to our problems?

And the Lord God of Israel said: *I will be there on the rock at Horeb. Strike the **rock**, and water will come out of it... I AM that rock full of water.*

And Jesus our Lord said: *Those who drink of the source of life that I will give them will never get thirsty to all eternity. The water of life that I will give will become a spring of the water of life gushing up to eternal life. I AM, Jesus said. [that is the Greek] I AM the one who is speaking to you.*

Maybe, along with Israel, maybe getting to our promised land isn't as important as we think. Maybe it's the journey in the desert that really tells the story of who *we* are created to be, the story of what can happen - there in the wilderness – between God and us. Maybe the wilderness is where we will recognize the gift of God, the gift of living water where there was no water, or no life, or no hope?

Maybe it is exactly those places and times when our bitterness and disappointment tempt us to turn resentfully against others that we can be led to the rock that gives that living water. (Or, as my spiritual director is so fond of saying: "Don't squander this pain, Elizabeth!") So far, the reflections of our saints of St. Paul's on Wednesday evenings this Lent have supported this idea. Our wilderness can be a diagnosis or a prison or death or aging or addiction or any place where an unwelcome reality seems to bar our way to the promised land we think would be the answer to our

problems. The wilderness *is* the place where we find out who we are really created to be, where we come to recognize the gift of God, the gift of living water where there was no water, no life, no hope.

Just as it was with the Samaritan woman, we are learning that it is through no “righteousness” of our own, through no heritage or religious virtue or physical body or self-defense or security measure of any kind that our thirst can ever be quenched. It is drinking from the well of Jesus, the rock that can provide the water of life where there was no water. That is the Way of *Spirit and Truth* the desert can teach us.

The saints of St. Paul’s, at their Stations of the Cross, have been lighting this Way for us: *The water of life that I give has become in them and will become in them a spring of living water gushing up to eternal life.* God’s gift of life **is** revealed in just the place and on just the journey where no life and no hope are believed possible.

It *is* what we are longing for. And we know just where we can get it.