

## Memory and Wilderness

Exodus 17:1-7

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Lenten Series: Journeys in the Wilderness

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*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.*

*<sup>2</sup> 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?" <sup>3</sup> 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?"*

*<sup>4</sup> So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." <sup>5</sup> 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.*

*<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> He called the place Massah<sup>[a]</sup> and Meribah,<sup>[b]</sup> (test and quarrel) because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"*

*Exodus 17:1-7*

I want to talk for a few minutes today about faith and memory.

The Christian faith depends on remembering. Consider how much you and I depend on the gospels for our understanding about Jesus—who he is and what he means. We would not know Jesus without the memories of the early Christian communities, those first person and oral traditions that found their way into writing.

When we celebrate Communion which we say is an experience Christ's ongoing presence, that presence is mediated through memory—"we remember that on the night Jesus, he gathered his loved ones around him...." Even real experiences of God in the present lean on memory to give them shape and substance. We remember what God did and where God was, in order to know what God does and where God is.

So much of faith depends on remembering. Memory is a curious thing, isn't it? Mine is not so good. I can't remember where I put my keys or my phone or the receipts I need for my taxes. I can't remember the birthdays of my family members.

Memory is unreliable. That's not even the most troubling thing about memory. The troubling thing about memory is how selective it is. We remember certain things, not others. We remember things in a certain way.

There's a line from the play "The History Boys" that says : "there's no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it."

Think about historical places you have been. Places that are beautiful and interesting stories. And yet show us the ways we mis-remember from an early age.

- Plymouth Rock, which is completely disappointing as a rock, it is not even where the Pilgrims landed... they really landed out at the tip of Cape Cod

A friend recently told me about his memory and reflections of going to Monticello.

*Monticello 30 years ago, and I still remember walking through the rooms and learning about Jefferson and his brilliant mind and his love of art, history, and science, and his famous declaration “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and they are endowed by their creator with inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...”*

*When you went to Monticello 30 years ago, there was a small separate tour you could take. Mulberry Row, where many of the 130 enslaved people who lived at Monticello lived and worked. This is kind of the way Jefferson wanted it. He had, after all, installed dumbwaiters in the dining room and all other manner of tricks to make enslaved persons all but invisible to his guests at Monticello.*

*A few years ago, they re-designed the tour at Monticello. Now, the stories of enslaved persons are told along with Jefferson’s in the same single narrative. One feature of the tour, I’m told, is this small room attached to the south wing of the main house that was covered up in 1941 by the construction of a tourist bathroom. It is now understood that this room, only a few feet from Jefferson’s own bedroom, was inhabited by Sally Hemings.*

What is it that we choose to remember?

Many places in the South they are having fights over monuments. A few folks have been trying to get some of the statues removed related to confederate leaders. Difficult conversations and decisions.

Reminds us to pay good attention to memory. To your own. To our nation’s. To that of our faith. So much of our lives—and certainly so much of our faith—depends on how and what we remember.

Which brings us to this story from Exodus, in which the people of God have, yet again, had it with the wilderness. They are done with its unpredictability. They have had enough of aimless wandering. Enough of the hunger pangs. Enough of throats parched. They are dying. And they lash out at Moses and they cry out to God—*God, where are you?*

God comes to the people. God meets their needs. God gives them water from the rock.

You might expect that they would then choose to name this place, “God’s great provision!” “God makes waters flow!” “God of living waters!” This should be a place where a statue goes up—no, not a statue, a fountain! Yes, a nice, flowing fountain showing Moses striking the rock with his staff and water pours out! And there can be a wading pool down below and kids can play in it all summer long. That’s what they should have done here.

But, of course, that’s not what they do. They name the place “Massah and Meribah.” Testing and quarrel.

What committee approved that? But thank God they did.

Whoever said that remembering rightly—remembering faithfully—was a matter of only remembering the good stuff?

In fact, isn’t there wisdom in remembering the hard times? Don’t we learn so much about ourselves—so much about life—in the times that we struggle? In the times when we cry out and God does not answer—or doesn’t answer in the way we wanted?

- We learn about our own strength
- We learn that God is not a vending machine, not a wish-fulfiller
- We learn that to experience the Spirit in the silence

Every time I sit with a family to plan the funeral of a loved one, as we talk about the logistics, I invite them into a time of remembering. We talk about their loved one's childhood, and their hobbies, and their passions, and always the people they love. And these are joyful recollections. I always, toward the end of the conversation, make a point to ask, "What do you think, were the hard parts of their life?" Where did she struggle? What were his wilderness experiences? What pain did she experience that never quite left?

Those questions take the remembering into a deeper place. They are almost always relieved to be asked. Yes... yes there was this about them... too, that shaped who they were.

The big story of Exodus and the big story of God is the story of God's abiding presence. Of God's deep compassion. Of God's provision and grace. But the experience of the Israelites—and our own experience of God—is one of wandering, in stages. Struggling.

As we as a country and world have been faced with the incredible realities of the coronavirus these past few weeks and especially in these past few days, it has certainly been a time when we want to know God's presence, want to feel the Spirit holding us, reminding us, comforting us, protecting us. Help us not be afraid.

The substance of our faith depends on remembering. The hunger *and* the manna. The thirst *and* the water from the rock. The dark night of the soul *and* the mercy that is new each morning.

Perhaps you, as part of your Lenten practice, will take some time to remember your own journey.

What brought you to this community faith, this church, First Presbyterian Church?

What—where—when was your own wilderness?

How have people in the church supported you in those times?

Even though we are not sitting together in the chapel or sanctuary, may we remember that our church is more than a place. We are a community knit together, offering living water and manna for the journey.

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