



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

1st October 2023, 18th Sunday after Pentecost, 5th Sunday of Creation

17 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 quarrelled 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 for 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 quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Exodus 17:1-7

8 When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him, 2 and there was a man with a skin disease who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." 3 He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing. Be made clean!" Immediately his skin disease was cleansed. 4 Then Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." Matthew 8:1-4

Sermon: Hope Springs Eternal by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

It's very common in ancient history to come across origin stories of something or some place. Stories of why a place or thing is called what it is. For instance, the Roman historian, Ovid, would tell stories within stories within stories, often going off on these quite longwinded tangents to explain the origin of this place, or that flower, or that animal.

To our modern ears, these aetiologies (that's the technical term) can seem a bit of distraction from the main thrust of the story. But in large part, I wonder if that's because we've become disconnected from our land and from the oral histories and mythologies that rooted us in it.

For instance, you still hear origin stories today particularly within indigenous mythologies and histories. Why? Because these stories connect people with their land, with their ancestors, and with the created order. These stories cultivate identity and belonging.

So it's no surprise that we find many of these aetiologies in the Old Testament, the scriptures of the Hebrew people. In fact, our reading today from Exodus is such a story. We heard why there is a place called Massah and Meribah (apparently, this place had two names). Now, I imagine most of us know nothing about Massah and Meribah. Those places mean nothing to us because we don't have a connection to the land on the Sinai Peninsula.

And so we hear this story without that connection to the language, the land, the history – we tend to focus on other things. So when you heard the story today, what did you focus on? For me, it was the miracle of Moses bringing forth water from the desert rock by striking it with his staff. Certainly, it's a key and memorable part of the story.

But, if that were the focus, you'd think that the place would be called something like: "the place of living water", "rock of flowing water", or "God-provides" or something to that effect.

But that's not what the place is called. It's known, as I said, by two names: Massah and Meribah. What do they mean? They mean "the place of quarrelling" and "the place of testing" because this was the place where the people of Israel quarrelled with God and tested the Lord, asking whether God was with them or not.

That's the focus here. Not the water from rock as amazing as that is. No, the testing and the quarrelling. The names are an insight, I think, not only into the meaning of this story but, I would argue, into the whole story of the Exodus. Because if you read the book of Exodus from beginning to end, it reads like one big, long quarrel with God:

God provides for the people. The people doubt God and complain. God provides for the people again. The people doubt God and complain again. God provides for the people, and so on and so forth...

For forty years, the people of Israel wander with God in the wilderness. For forty years, they wander in the hope of a promised future which is not yet evident. For forty years they argue and squabble and doubt as God meets them on their way, guiding, cherishing, rebuking, chastising, coercing – leading them step by painful step to the Promised Land and a new future together.

All that to say, the journey with God in the wilderness is, for the people of Israel, not merely a place, but a way of being, a state of mind, the foundation of who they are. We see that in Psalm 78 for example. It's a liturgy that retells the Exodus story, inviting the people to remember and indwell that history every generation anew.

So it got me wondering, what it means for us to indwell that history today? For us to dwell in Massah and Meribah as we journey with God in our own wilderness?

Because like the people of Israel, we too may find ourselves in a place of despair. A desert place within the heart where the water runs out. Many of us have been in such a place. Some of us may currently be in such a place. A place where we look within ourselves for the resources to get by – and find we are empty, thirsty, parched. We do not have enough.

It's not too much of a hyperbole, I think, to say we are living in a wilderness time. By that I mean that we live in a time when the complexity and scale of some of the challenges facing humanity breed within us feelings of despair and hopelessness. An inner wilderness.

We are on a journey to a new future, but we don't know how to get there. And the problems, like finding food and water in the desert, can seem insurmountable, crippling.

We know, for instance, that climate anxiety and anxiety about other complex issues beyond our control are very real contributors to mental unhealth today, especially among younger generations, who have grown up in this age of permanent anxiety.

I'm sure we've all felt a degree of despair or hopelessness at the scale and complexity of the problems before us a human race. You know, that despair and hopelessness has a name? It's called "doomerism". It describes that wilderness state of mind where we get so overwhelmed by the bad news surrounding us that we shut it out and shut ourselves down, becoming apathetic and inert. It's too big to get our heads around, so we don't do anything.

And like the hardened rock in the desert at Meribah, our own hearts become hardened, shutting out the world in order to protect ourselves.

But here's the thing: that hardness of heart gets us nowhere. It doesn't solve anything. It maintains the status quo. Because in that very act of protecting ourselves, we shut out the world. We shut out others. We shut out God. We give ourselves over to that despair as we withdraw within.

It strikes me though, that God does not allow the people of Israel to be given over to despair. Like water from the rock, hope springs eternal in their midst. Two things happen at Massah and both are significant:

The first is that the people of Israel give voice to their despair. They quarrel and fight back expressing their outrage. So passionately that Moses actually feared for his life. They challenged God: *you're supposed to be with us. You led us here. So where are you?*

I hear the words of the leper directed to Jesus in the same way: *Jesus, you can heal me, if you choose. So heal me.*

There's an invitation here for us. In a time of permanent anxiety and hopelessness, we are invited to be a people who quarrel with God. Who express our outrage and helplessness. Who refuse to give ourselves over to despair. Who challenge God to step up and do something.

And God does do something we're told. That's the second thing that happens in that place of quarrelling. In that place of honest, passionate prayer. God meets the people there and provides for their need, giving them the strength to carry on.

I want to suggest that when we are in the wilderness places of our lives, when we are despairing and feeling hopeless, when we begin to notice ourselves stop caring – that the best thing we can do is give voice to those feelings.

Give voice to those feelings before God in prayer. Give voice to those feelings together in corporate worship. Give voice to those feelings among friends and people we trust. The best thing we can do is to quarrel and challenge God together.

Why? Because to do so is an act of faith. To do so is to claim that God is with us. That this world should be different. That we refuse to give ourselves over to doomerism. And therefore, we cry out. And when we cry out, we open ourselves up to hear God's word of hope in response once more.

Both stories today suggest that when we reach out to God in need, God will not allow our hearts to harden. But like Moses, striking the desert rock, breaking it open, so too God will break open our hearts, so *that* hope may well up and out of us like living water; so *that* we may learn to love again; so *that* we may be sustained for the journey.

As we reach out to God to faith, we will find that, like the leper, God in Christ is already reaching out toward us.

You've heard the saying, *hope springs eternal* – the title of today's sermon. It's a quote from a poem by Alexander Pope:

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast:
Man never is, but always to be blest.
The soul, uneasy and confined from home,
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.”

Hope springs eternal. What a beautiful image for baptism. An eternal spring of hope in the wilderness. Today, as we continue to journey together, we come to this fountain of living water. A sign in the desert of God's saving and renewing presence with us. God's response to all our quarrelling and questioning. God's unequivocal yes to us.

Today, we are placing Lucy within that stream of hope, which flows eternally from God to God. Today, we are welcoming her into a tradition of quarrelling with God, honestly bringing all our questions and doubts before God, trusting that we will be heard. And as we place her in this stream, we are claiming God's love for her and nourishing presence with her, whichever wilderness she may wander in life. Today, we are committing her to God's care and provision, trusting that she will never be given over to despair, but that hope will spring eternally in her. Today, we are binding her heart with the heart of Christ, who is living water, that she may drink deeply and be nourished this day and every day. May it be so for her. And may it be so for all of us together. Amen.