

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
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In Life and In Death, We Belong to God: Good News for Thirsty Souls
Exodus 17: 1-7
3rd Sunday in Lent
March 19, 2017

Today's Scripture lesson begins, as do many narratives in the Old Testament, by putting what comes next in its historical context. The first line reads, "From the wilderness of Sin, the whole congregation journeyed by stages as the LORD commanded."

What exactly had happened in the wilderness up to this point in the Israelites' 40-year trek from Egypt to the Promised Land?

What was notable about the wilderness of Sin was that the people had no bread. Remembering (or perhaps mis-remembering) how their stewpots back in Egypt had been overflowing with meat and rich gravy and their kitchens redolent with the aroma of fresh-baked yeasty bread, they complained to their leaders Moses and Aaron as they had already done twice before in the short time that had elapsed since the backs of their sandals and robes had dried out from the spray of the waters crashing over the heads of the Egyptians who had pursued them. In short order, God provided bread in the form of manna ("the taste of it was like wafers made with honey," Exodus 16: 31) and succulent meat in the form of quail.

What happened in God's provision of food to eat, recounted in Exodus 16, gives readers a huge hint about what is going to happen in Exodus 17.

Where's Waldo?

I think that I'm on pretty safe ground when I offer up the conjecture that most everybody here has at one time or another pored over a detailed double-page illustration depicting scads of people engaged in scads of activities in search of the elusive Waldo in his distinctive red-and-white striped shirt and beanie.

The ancient writer of Exodus has given us a Where's Waldo-like double-page spread of a narrative depicting scads of Israelites—old people, middle-aged people, young people, children, babies, sheep, goats, and cattle—with every single soul among them baking under the unrelenting glare of the desert sun and dying—yes, literally dying—from thirst.

In the writer's framing of the narrative, the question becomes not "Where's Waldo?" but rather, "Where are you in this story of the God to whom we belong in life and in death, the God who both gives and is good news for thirsty souls?"

The desert stories of the Old Testament tend to be critical toward the Israelites, emphasizing their disagreeableness, their anger, their antagonism toward Moses who must have rolled his eyes and

muttered to himself under his breath more than once, “It was sure a lot easier to lead sheep than to lead people!”

I have come to think that the Israelites have been given something of a bad rap by their Old Testament chroniclers, however. I’ve visited deserts in that part of the world; I experienced the Middle Eastern desert from the comfort of an air-conditioned tour bus with a guide who was assiduously careful to keep us well-supplied with bottles of drinking water so that we would not become dehydrated. It was hot. It was HOT! And I may have even been heard to utter a tiny word of complaint about it!

It was far worse for the Israelites!

The Israelites had left their Egyptian tormenters behind, but they still lived in the real world of hunger, thirst, and uncertainty. As they entered the desert, food became an issue. Water became an issue. These weren’t mere inconveniences. They were serious threats to their well-being, to the well-being, the very lives, not only of themselves, but their children, their step-children, their grandchildren, the well-being of their livestock upon which they depended for milk and meat(1)

Underneath the Israelites’ anger, we can sense that they were deeply afraid.

Perhaps there is a modern-day parallel in the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, which can give us a sense of the deep fear that lay beneath the Israelites’ complaints.

Brady Dennis, a writer for the *Washington Post*, told the stories of a cavalcade of Flint residents in a wrenching piece published last October, more than a year after government officials finally acknowledged that an entire city’s water system was contaminated by lead with many residents still relying on bottled water for drinking, cooking, and bathing.

“Darlene McClendon, 62, looks out at the two dozen young faces in her classroom at Eisenhower Elementary School and wonders: How has the lead affected them? Which ones will suffer most?”

Already, she is convinced she’s seeing changes in how some students retain her science or math or social studies lessons. “A couple days later, it’s not there,” she says. “I know there’s a difference, because I’ve been in Flint teaching for the last 26 years.”

Last fall, when the state finally acknowledged that lead-tainted water was endangering thousands of children in the city, fear and uncertainty filled the school’s hallways.

“I heard children say, ‘Am I going to die? Am I going to get sick?’ How do you respond without tearing up?” McClendon says. “I told them, ‘No, you’re not going to die.’ [But] I don’t know that they’re not going to get sick later.”

This fall, the school water fountains are still off limits. The children hardly mention the water crisis, even as they lug their bottled water from class to class. “That’s their reality,” their teacher says. She, on the other hand, seethes about all that has not happened, the help that hasn’t come, the promises that remain unfulfilled. On top of all the other obstacles her children face, clean water has become yet another hurdle.

“They’re behind the eight ball already, and then you add the water crisis,” McClendon says. “That’s what I want to say to the governor: How dare you poison my kids? Our kids. Here we are a year later, and things have not changed for us. Or them.” (2)

Perhaps, when the question is asked, “Where are you in the story which is today’s Scripture lesson?” you would find yourself among the Israelites who are deeply thirsty, deeply fearful. Perhaps your thirst is not related to actual physical thirst, as the Israelites was. Perhaps the situation in Flint and the fear that the residents of Flint carry with them seems far removed from you as well. Perhaps your fear is concrete in a different way, fears related to unhappiness or uncertainty in your home, your school, your workplace, this community, our state, the world. Perhaps you are asking, in one way or another, the deeply spiritual question which sprang from the lips of the Israelites, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

If so, then I invite you to see yourself not only among the scads of Israelites (keep your place among them!), but also in Moses and the elders who become participants in transmitting the gift of God which quenches the thirst of the people and makes evident the truth that God is, now and always, among us.

Brady Dennis, the *Washington Post* reporter, also profiled Rigel Dawson, the pastor of North Central Church of Christ in Flint. According to him, the anger of and frustration over Flint’s contaminated water, so visceral at first, over time has given way to something far worse, resignation. Now the pastor comes to his pulpit each Sunday determined to deliver a message of encouragement and perseverance.(3)

Just so, Moses and the elders refused to be resigned to the thirst of the people. They took God’s gift of the rod that had struck the sea and parted the waters and struck the rock and the waters poured forth and the people were saved once again and the answer was there for them to taste and see, “Yes, God is among us.”

It is the truth that is enacted every time we baptize someone as we are baptizing Kevin Edward Price II today. The same water which God gives as gift to quench our thirst is also a sign that God is among us as we as those who follow Christ pass on his treasures and gifts.

I will close with one example of how we at Davidson College Presbyterian Church are a part of sharing God who is good news for thirsty people.

The Birthday Offering of Presbyterian Women celebrates Presbyterian women’s history of mission giving. It was launched in 1922 to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Woman’s Auxiliary of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Since that time, it has become an annual tradition and has funded nearly 100 major mission projects that continue to make a difference in the lives of women and children.

When Presbyterian Women gather for brunch on Tuesday, they will participate in the 2017 Birthday by supporting the Navajo Water Project which will eventually provide water systems to 205 families at the Smith Lake Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. They will participate in providing a running water system for 40 families that do not have access to running water in their homes. They currently store their water in pots, pans, and 55 gallon drums; they will be provided with a cistern, pump, sink, shower, and all pipes for the installation of their water system.

This, my dear brothers and sisters, is good news. It is good news not only for the thirsty souls on the Smith Lake Navajo Reservation, but as Presbyterians across the land share our treasures and gifts readily and joyfully as we do every Sunday when the offering plate is passed to meet so many needs in this community and around the globe. It is also good news of hope and encouragement for our own thirsty souls as well.

1. Patricia Tull, "Commentary on Exodus 17: 1-7," www.workingpreacher.org, March 19, 2017.
2. Brady Dennis, "'If I could afford to leave, I would.' In Flint, a water crisis with no end in sight," *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2016.
3. *Ibid.*