

“But the People Are Thirsty”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Exodus 17:1-7
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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If you’ve ever taken a trip with a group of people, then you know there’s usually a point along the way where the travelers get grouchy. When you’re that up close with people for long periods of time, things can get testy. Last year when my sister got engaged, she wanted our family to meet his family, and so they rented a vacation lodge. It would be two families who’d never met—eleven people plus two dogs—in one house for five days. After she pitched the idea, my dad told my mom, “I don’t want to stay five days with eleven people I *do* know.”

The soon-to-be newly weds were excited, but some of us introverts were a bit more skeptical. As it turned out, the joint-family trip went quite well. We enjoyed one another’s company, and the skeptics among us were pleasantly surprised. It didn’t hurt that the members of my brother-in-law’s family were all excellent cooks. Every day was a feast that brought us happily to the table. With a plate of good, rich food in front of you and a glass of wine in hand, the conversation flowed easily and the developing bond felt natural. We chatted recipes and family traditions. Afterward we washed dishes together, stored leftovers, asked if anyone wanted more wine. Food had this way of bringing us together.

I remember another trip I took in college to the remote interior of Alaska. For the last leg of our journey, we got up very, very early in the morning and took a small six-seat plane to a very small village where we would await our boat ride down the Yukon. We hadn’t eaten since the day before, and no one had thought to bring snacks. Upon arrival, we hurried through the little town to find its one and only store, but to our dismay, the store was closed and didn’t open for another two hours. We waited. The two hours came and went, the store was still closed, and we got our first lesson about village time. “Schedule” was a loose term. The store would open when the store opened, and our boat would arrive when the boat arrived. We wondered which would come first, and we tried not to act too hangry. Finally the small little convenient store opened, and we went inside immediately. We hunted down a box of crackers, a block of cheese, and a roll of sausage, which we sliced using a pocket knife sterilized with hand sanitizer. We sat midday along the bank of the Yukon River, passing around cheese slices and crackers for breakfast, and I am here to tell you, it was the best tasting meal I’ve ever eaten.

Food has this way of bringing people together and rejuvenating our spirits.

When the Israelites were traveling through the wilderness, they hit that point where travelers get grouchy, and their grouch is recorded in Holy Scripture for all to see. If someone were to write a story about me, I’d prefer to have my best side showing. In other words, don’t you dare start recording when I’m hungry. But, alas, the Bible never shies away from the raw, not-so-glamorous in humanity. In Exodus chapter 16, directly before the story we read today, the Hebrew people not only hit the grouch point, they went far beyond it to the point where there was no hiding the hangry and they had not a drop of energy left for pleasantries. They complained and complained until finally God rained down quail from the heavens and made

manna appear with the morning dew. The only catch was—each person could only gather enough food for the day. If you tried to gather more, it would rot. But the next day God would do it all over again, as if to say, “You really can trust me.”

But trust doesn't come easily when you're wandering through a wilderness, as I am sure you are aware. God had no sooner provided manna and quail than another complaint rose up among the people. There was no water and they were thirsty! Why, oh why did they leave behind Egypt, beautiful Egypt where there was plenty of food and drink and stability? Surely slavery was better than this! Why had God brought them out into the desert if they were only to die? They made these objections loud and clear.

By this point in the story, Moses wasn't in the best of moods either, and the people's complaints were getting on his ever-living nerve. “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do test the Lord?” he snapped back. In the book of Numbers, this same story from Exodus is repeated, but in the Numbers version, Moses was even grumpier. “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” he shouted before hitting the rock—perhaps a little too aggressively—and sending water shooting forth.

Who knows why Moses was so grouchy? Having no water seems like a legitimate complaint to me. Maybe he was thirsty too, and it made him irritable. Maybe he was annoyed that after so many miracles, the people still didn't trust God. Or maybe he was just tired of listening to complaints. What had they expected, fleeing from Egypt into the wilderness? A five star hotel with a full service bar? Then again, maybe grouchy Moses had his own secret stash of water—a private canteen reserved for the leadership—and so he just couldn't relate to the suffering of his people. Whatever his reasons, Moses was fed up.

I mean, look at all the wonders God had done! And still they worry! Still they complain! Still they talk of Egypt as if their prison were a paradise compared to where God has taken them now. So little gratitude! I wonder if there's a lesson in that for me—an admonition not to get so worked up when I'm not getting what I want at the time I want it.

But on second thought, I don't actually know what it is like to be legitimately thirsty and without any foreseeable source of water. I've really never been without a water source. Have you? Do you know what it's like to begin to die of thirst and dehydration?

I do not, so I decided to look it up. This is a bit gruesome, but bear with me for a minute as I read the following description:

As dehydration begins, there is extreme thirst, dry mouth and thick saliva," Dr. Stevens explained. "The patient becomes dizzy, faint and unable to stand or sit; has severe cramping in the arms and legs as the sodium and potassium concentrations in the body go up as fluids go down. In misery, the patient tries to cry but there are no tears. The patient experiences severe abdominal cramps, nausea and dry-heaving as the stomach and intestines dry out.

By now the skin and lips are cracking and the tongue is swollen," Dr. Stevens continued. "The nose may bleed as the mucous membranes dry out and break down. The skin loses elasticity,

thins and wrinkles. The hands and feet become cold as the remaining fluids in the circulatory system are shunted to the vital organs in an attempt to stay alive. The person stops urinating and has severe headaches as their brain shrinks from lack of fluids. The patient becomes anxious and gets progressively more lethargic. Some patients have hallucinations and seizures as their body chemistry becomes even more imbalanced.

It sounds terrifying to be truly thirsty. I don't know exactly how thirsty God's people were, but since there were hundreds of them in a desert without a water source, I can imagine dehydration was a part of this story. There were elderly people for whom the journey would be tough even with plenty of water. There were mothers who could not produce milk for their babies. There were toddlers calling for water, not able to understand why it was being withheld.

While looking at artwork through the centuries depicting this scene where water pours forth from the rock, I was especially struck by a portion of a wall fresco from 1543 entitled "The Miracle of the Spring." I was captivated because the people are falling over themselves to get a drink. One man is flat on his stomach, head partially submerged, desperately gulping. Another man leans over, mouth gaping open like a baby bird. A woman with a screaming baby on one hip leans forward with a small bowl, trying to squeeze in close enough to reach the water. People are pushing in with pitchers and containers—it is hard to tell if they are fighting one another for the water or helping carry water to those who cannot make it through the crowd. I was struck by just how thirsty they were, and how primal thirst is. How without food or drink everything else becomes irrelevant.

Last week an official from the UN said the world is facing its largest humanitarian crisis in UN history. More than 20 million people across four countries in Africa and the Middle East are at risk of starvation and famine.

I wanted to preach this sermon about spiritual thirst, about our longing for God, for assistance, for refreshment in times that feel so dry and desert-like. I wanted to talk about spiritual hunger and thirst because I have experience with that sort of aching. I know what it's like to thirst for God and to hunger for companionship, answers, and love.

What I do not know is what it is like to have no water and no bread. What I do not know is what it is like not to be able to feed my own children. What I do not know is what it is like to be so physically hungry and thirsty that it overwhelms everything else I could possibly care about.

Every day you and I are living with tension because, in one sense, we *are* living through desert times in our country—a drought of kindness, of goodwill, of truth-telling and decency. And that drought is real and has real consequences for people's lives. Look no further than the recent proposal to remove funding from Meals and Wheels—a ministry in which so many of our Lake Shore people are involved—and the threat to those who hunger is close to home. And for some among us, the desert is closer still. In addition to the national problems, many of us face our own personal deserts of various sorts—health concerns, financial burdens, fractured relationships, and terrible loss. Our droughts are real and have real consequences for our lives.

And then there is the literal drought most of us know nothing about, and the suffering and fear that is beyond our comprehension. Actual, physical starvation is a real and present threat for millions of people we may never even meet.

You and I live in this in-between space, where we are both the thirsty and the well-fed. We are both the wanderer and the homesteader. We are both the comforted and the uncomfortable. The tendency is to try and live in one reality only, so that things don't feel so complicated. But that isn't an honest way to live.

The Hebrew people were the people God had miraculously provided for time and time again AND they were the people without any water. They were the people God had liberated from slavery AND they were the people stuck in the desert.

We are the people who come from this story and are acquainted with desert lands AND we are the people who know nothing about what it is to truly thirst. We are people who have been enslaved by the chains of our addictions, our depression, our anxiety, our lust for wealth, our family trauma, AND we are the people who have never been Pharaoh's slaves, not to mention plantation slaves or sex slaves. We are the people who lead with courage, AND we are the critics who make a sport of assigning blame and calling it a contribution. We are the people who care for the poor, AND we are the impoverished who chase empty wealth. We are people who gather at sumptuous tables to feast and feast again, and we are the people with broken families and a divided nation who hunger and thirst for reconciliation.

Every day we live in the tension between our privilege and our pain. We're not always sure if we need delivering or whether we've already been delivered, whether we are in legitimate crisis or whether we are complaining about the small stuff.

We might wonder what we can learn from the Israelite journey out of Egypt and through the wilderness. But maybe this isn't a story about what to do or what not to do. Maybe it is just a story of what is. Maybe it's not a story about righteousness or the lack thereof; maybe it's a story about God's faithfulness. Maybe it's not a story about whether it is shameful to beg and to complain; maybe it is a story about a God who listens.

Maybe there isn't a moral to this story; maybe there isn't an "application." Maybe every Bible story we read isn't asking to be converted into a to-do list. Maybe some stories are there for companionship. Maybe some stories persist, not because they tell us how to live but because they give us hope, and what is life without hope?

These stories are our traveling companions, and they remind us it is okay to cry, and it is okay to complain. God doesn't stop listening just because your prayers sound like whines. It is okay to ask questions, and it is okay to wonder whether the road to liberation is supposed to be this difficult. It is okay to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the world's need. It is okay to be angry. It is okay to hope. It is okay to ask for help, and it is okay to throw a party when the water arrives. It is okay to rejoice in the present gifts of each moment even when the world is bleak and the future uncertain. It's okay to feel lost. It is okay to wonder where you're going and how to get there. It's okay for your heart to break when you see people suffer. It's okay for your heart to

break when you suffer. Suffering isn't a competition, and it's okay to grieve your loss even though others have lost more. It's okay to feel tired. It's okay to be happy, and it's okay to wonder if you should feel guilty for being happy when others feel the sky is falling. All this desert angst is *normal*, and it hasn't prompted God to abandon God's people yet.

There is always more work to be done. Always. And there will always be stories to tell and stories worth remembering. Sometimes the stories teach us how to live. Sometimes the stories keep us alive.

O God of desert sands and oasis springs, help us on our journey through strange terrain and uncharted territory. We are so grateful for your many provisions, your mercies which are new every day like the morning dew. We are amazed by our daily bread. AND. We are so very thirsty, Lord. We carry around an ache in the belly that longs to be satisfied. Even when we are not thirsty, somewhere in the world your children are, and we do not understand in the slightest why you do not give them water. We wonder often if you are really there. Why are there not more rivers springing up in the desert?

O God of desert sands and oasis springs, hear our complaint. Turn your ear to the words of our groaning, and show forth your river-making power. Be our rock within a weary land. Be a home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way. Care not only for us, but for all your children. Make us wellsprings of living water for everyone who thirsts. Let us be water. Let us be bread. O God of famine and feast, of broken bread and poured out wine, write your story in our hearts. Write your story in our hearts, we beseech you, O Lord, that we might not lose hope. Amen.