

“Repeat”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Exodus 17:1-7
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on October 1, 2017

Sound familiar? If hearing this story gave you a sense of *déjà vu*, it’s because this isn’t exactly a new story. Just last week the Israelites complained to Moses because they didn’t have anything to eat. Last week Moses said to the people, “Why do you complain against me?” Last week the Israelites moaned, “We should have stayed in Egypt.” Last week God said, “Hold your horses. I’m gonna take care of it.” Last week, God took care of it.

This week? More of the same. In fact, this week’s story from Exodus 17 is the *third* repeat of an eerily similar narrative. There was yet another sustenance scarcity story before the manna and quail in chapter 16. Exodus chapter 15 says this:

Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?” Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink.

Maybe you’ve noticed, water itself is a reoccurring theme in the book of Exodus. There is of course the baby Moses, whose name means, “to draw from the waters,” who was, in fact, drawn up out of the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter. Moses, the Hebrew baby, who, according to the Pharaoh’s decree should have been thrown into the Nile to die just as soon as he was delivered from his mother’s womb waters by the midwives. Moses, who drew water from the well for priest of Midian’s daughters. Moses, who turned the water of the Nile River to blood.

There is also the great parting of the Red Sea, when the wind of God drove the waters apart, and the Israelites walked through on dry land, signaling the new birth of a nation. Then they had only barely made it out of Egypt when they were quickly worn down by thirst. The only water they found was undrinkable, but with God’s help, the bitter water turned sweet.

Unsurprisingly the people did not learn from their own stories. It didn’t take long and they were back to doubting, back to complaining, back to reminiscing about the good old days as slaves in Egypt. Today’s story sounds so very familiar because it is familiar. It keeps happening to the Israelites, and I reckon it also keeps happening to us.

There’s a reason the Psalmists continually give thanks for the old stories. There’s a reason the work of worship is often the work of repeating, repeating, repeating what we think we already know. Because when the going gets tough, it turns out we’re not so sure we know anymore. It takes a long time and lot of retelling to get God’s goodness down into our bones, past all our bad experiences and past all our fears.

I wonder if, in addition to reading the biblical psalms, we also ought to write our own. What if we had a story of God’s goodness that we wrote down and rehearsed? The story of God’s love for Lake Shore? The story of God’s love for you? It would be filled with hardships and struggles

and complaints and disappointments, but I think it would also be marked by deliverance and joys and daily bread. What are the stories you tell yourself about God and are they good ones? It's important to be honest, of course, about the ways you feel God has let you down. But sometimes I let my cynicism cloud my vision so that I no longer see the gifts. I have to keep gratitude on repeat so I will remember the good God has done.

But back to water. I want to note that it's easy enough for me to say, "God will provide" when I've never been actually thirsty—not in the three-days-without-water kind of way. I was recently talking to someone from Beaumont, Texas who shared that during the hurricane the city went three days without running water, and they didn't know when the water would be back. He said people were filling buckets with water from neighbor's swimming pools in order to flush the toilets. He said, "You think you understand the importance of water. You've helped dig wells in other countries. But then you experience being without running water—even for just three days—and you gain a new perspective."

On the one hand, the Hebrew people kept telling themselves the wilderness stories long after they were no longer in the actual wilderness. They repeated the stories in times of plenty and in times of want, in seasons of spiritual drought and in annual celebrations. They re-appropriated stories of wilderness wandering when they were in exile. In other words, it is good and right to remember these stories and count them as our own, though we may know nothing of literal, physical thirst. We recycle these stories as metaphors, which God's people have been doing for thousands of years. On the other hand, let us not forget those without access to clean water. Just because this story is metaphor for us doesn't mean it isn't parched-throat real for someone else.

Frankly, I don't entirely know what repeating these stories means for the truly thirsty, the physically dehydrated. Maybe this is when storytelling becomes prayer. *Let it be so, dear God, let it be so again.* Maybe when we encounter the thirsty, it isn't our job to sit in superiority over the Israelites, judging them for their apparent lack of faith. Maybe it is our job to join them in their complaint until our voices grow hoarse from the asking. Maybe we will have the stamina to keep asking *because* we have heard the stories. Because we have been told time and time again that God listens and God hears. Because God sure better pay attention this time. Because we can't leave the thirsty to do their praying alone.

Today's story isn't the first time the people are thirsty, and it won't be the last. In the book of Numbers, chapter 20, the people again complain of thirst, and Moses again strikes the rock and water pours forth. This time the people have been wandering in the wilderness for quite a while. Miriam has just died and was buried. This detail about Miriam's death led to the development in the Jewish tradition of Miriam's well. According to the tradition, God gave three gifts in accordance with the merits of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam: the pillar of cloud and fire for Aaron, manna for Moses, and a well for Miriam. The legend believes Miriam's well was a source of fresh water that followed the Israelites throughout the desert in the form of a large round rock that rolled along the sands with them. So long as Miriam lived, a fountain of fresh water continued to provide for the people. When she died, the well temporarily dried up.

Every year at Passover, near the end of the Seder meal, it is custom to pour a final glass of wine but not drink it. Open the front door, leave a seat for the prophet Elijah. According to tradition, "Elijah declared that he would return once each generation in the guise of someone poor or

oppressed, coming to people's doors to see how he would be treated . . . [to see] whether or not humanity [was] ready to participate in the dawn of the Messianic age. He is said to visit every seder, and sip there from his cup of wine.”ⁱ Leaving a cup for Elijah is a way of remembering that deliverance and liberation are not yet complete, and it is a way of inviting God to return and engage the ongoing story of our world where many people still remain in bondage.

At some contemporary Seder meals, they set out two cups at the end of the meal—a cup of wine for Elijah and a cup of water for Miriam. Despite God’s repetitive provision, still some go thirsty. Still some long for the well of Miriam to be revived, resurrected. The poet Marge Piercy writes this:

The cup of Elijah holds wine;
the cup of Miriam holds water.
Wine is more precious
until you have no water.

Water that flows in our veins,
water that is the stuff of life,
for we are made of breath
and water, vision

and fact. Elijah is
the extraordinary; Miriam
brings the daily wonders:
the joy of a fresh morning

like a newly prepared table,
a white linen cloth on which
nothing has yet spilled.
The descent into the heavy

waters of sleep healing us.
The scent of baking bread,
roasting chicken, fresh herbs,
the faces of friends across

the table: what sustains us
every morning, every evening,
the common daily miracles
like the taste of cool water.ⁱⁱ

Beloved, may we take long slow sips of the daily wonders. May we pray that all, all, all will know water, deliverance, hope. Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, *Velveteen Rabbi's Haggadah for Pesach*, <https://velveteenrabbi.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/vrhaggadah6.pdf>, 68.

ⁱⁱ Marge Piercy, “Miriam’s Cup,” *Colors Passing Through Us*.