

St. Andrew Evangelical Lutheran Church

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"Is the Lord with Us?" Exodus 17:1-7

Sunday March 15, 2020 – 3rd Sunday in Lent

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?" ³ But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" ⁴ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD answered Moses, "Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

How's it going? How was your day? We get asked these questions a lot, don't we? How do you answer? I'm sure there are many times when you give a very bright and chipper response. "It was a good day." "Things went well." "I'm content." Then there are those other days. You hear that question asked and you are just salivating, hungry to unload your complaints and frustrations. Maybe it was such a day that you don't even wait to get asked, you go looking for someone and say in a not-somuch-asking-but-telling-you-that-you-are-going-to-listen sort of way, "Let me tell you about my day." "The new project is soooo harrrrrrrd. It's ridiculous! Who thought this up?" "Everyone was trying to bring me down today. Absolutely nothing went right." "Do you know what they did to me? Oh, let me tell you..." "Can you believe they did that? I mean, the nerve!" Grumble, grumble, grumble. Complain, complain, complain.

Yeah, we complain. We have times when things really grind our gears and we need an outlet to express our frustration and irritation over all the things going on. The Israelites did too. They were people just like you and me. Things irritated them. They grumbled. They complained. We can see why the Israelites would complain.

Here you are in this caravan of people, and Moses, your great leader, takes you to this Rephidim place. It's all good except there's no water. No water. **"Can you believe it? Moses encamped us in an area with no water. How are we going to live? How are we going to survive? There's like two million of us plus all our livestock. What are we supposed to drink? I'm thirsty from the journey. My family is parched. My tongue is so dry it won't even moisten my sand chapped lips."** Your voice chimes right in with the others as they confront Moses. **"Give us water to drink!"** (verse 2) Moses defends himself, **"Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?"** (verse 2) Well, that still doesn't give us water. **"Hey Moses, we're thirsty! We are here**

at this place with no water because you led us here. This is your fault, Moses!" **"Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"** (verse 3) Grumble, grumble, grumble. Complain, complain, complain. Is the LORD with us?

It's pretty easy for us to look at these Israelites and shake our heads thinking, **"Oh, you of little faith. Didn't you Israelites learn anything from the manna and the quail or when the bitter water was turned sweet or when Pharaoh's chariots were submerged in water while all your people made it through alive?"** It's very easy to look down on them for their complaints - such a lack of trust in God. I mean they were even questioning if God was among them. How could they be so thick and complain so much?

We think that right up until we put ourselves in their place. Thirst for these Israelites is not like our thirst. If we detect a slight dryness to our throats, well, we can get up right now and head to the drinking fountain. We're thirsty after our jog or late at night while watching TV. It's pretty much a slight discomfort to have thirst.

Thirst for the Israelites in the desert, though, was an indication that death was not too far away. Camp in the desert in an area without an oasis - a water supply - and you know that you are not going to last long. On average it only takes three days to die of thirst. Your canteen or jug of water won't last long when you are partitioning it out for your spouse, your kids, yourself, and your animals, especially not when there are 2 million parched people. If we were in Rephidim, I think we just might have been right there with the crowd complaining and grumbling against Moses for leading us there.

We don't need an actual desert campsite without a water supply to have something to complain about. We know our complaints, but it's not the complaining itself that God records this story for us. We all have reasonable excuses for grumbling and

complaining. The part we need to really be concerned about is what is at the heart of our complaints.

Moses tried spelling it out to the Israelites as to why their complaining was so wrong. He asked, **“Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?”** (verse 2) Moses already knew why the Israelites were camped in Rephidim. He knew that the LORD had led them there. The people, though, claimed that they were lead out of Egypt just to die in the desert. This was a complete mockery of the amazing saving acts the LORD had displayed – everything from destroying Pharaoh’s army, the bitter water turned sweet, and the daily provisions of manna, all of it. After all they had seen and experienced, they now have the audacity to test God saying, **“Is the LORD among us or not?”** (verse 7)

This is what God had a problem with. Although their concern for water was legitimate, their accusation against God through their complaints was not. By complaining and grumbling in the way that they did, they were calling God out on the carpet. This was the creation grabbing the Creator by the ear to chastise Him. The Israelites were treating God like some dog in training when you grab him by the collar, lead him to what he destroyed or his accident on the rug, rubbing his nose in it saying **“bad dog, bad dog.”** By their grumbling and complaining, the Israelites are saying, **“Bad God, Bad God. Are you really with us, or did you just bring us out here to die?”** The pillar of cloud and pillar of fire were scoffed at; the amazing saving acts downplayed. This testing of God was an insult to His name – everything He had done for them, everything He was. That was the real content of their complaints, their sin against God.

Our own complaints can venture down that path as well. As we enter the deserts of our lives led there by God, we know how to complain and grumble. Where’s our Rephidim where we ask God the accusatory question, **“Are you really with us?”** That’s what happens when the problems of this life overwhelm us. We get led by God into a place that looks like there is no value, only wasteland, and we have those tough thoughts, **“God, You led me here? How am I going to take care of this and this?”** **“God, You took me on a path that doesn’t have a job. How am I supposed to pay for food, clothing, my mortgage?”** **“God, You gave me this disease. Really? Really, God? This is the path You want me to walk? It leads nowhere!”** **“God, You led me to do the right thing, but now everyone is against me. I have no friends, life’s horrible. Is this really where You wanted me to go?”** **“God, You took away my traveling companion, my loved one. I needed them. How am I supposed to continue on?”** **“Are You really with me, God?”**

It’s humbling to take that step back from our grumbling and complaining to look at the big picture and see how our complaints test God. In our rashness, our depression, our frustration, we take it out on Him. We think He’s got a couple screws loose to do this to us. It’s madness. He leads us to

places that look anything but helpful. It’s then when our mind wanders into those realms of **“Are You really with us, LORD?”**

That’s what the Israelites were asking when the LORD answered them yet again. In front of the elders of Israel, using the same staff that he had struck the Nile turning it to blood for the first plague on Egypt, Moses struck a rock with that staff at God’s command. Water came out, and the Israelites had all the water they needed. God provided. This is great, but then he renames Rephidim to Massah and Meribah. To us, the names would be “Testing” and “Quarreling.” The place was now both a testament to their sin of accusing God of not being with them as well as physical proof of the important fact that the LORD is indeed with them. The Samaritan woman probably had similar thoughts when she made her daily trips to the well. She would remember the stranger who knew her sins, but she would also remember his words – the living water – the message that he had come to take away her sin and take her to eternal life.

That’s what we learn from the Israelites at Massah and Meribah. Yes, God will lead us to some places where it looks like certain destruction. That’s when you remember to trust God as your Savior from seemingly fatal situations instead of accusing Him of not being with you. Instead of going to the grumble, grumble, grumble, complain, complain, complain, we remember that God provides us a way out through Him. He provides exactly what we need in the amount that we need when we need it. Sometimes that doesn’t fit in to our plans, our schedules, or our visions. He turns them all around so that we would trust in Him time and time again, so that we can say confidently even in the toughest times, **“The LORD is with us.”** Amen.