Foundational Stories #17 of 24:

"Water from the Rock"

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Exodus 17:1-7

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

September 27, 2026

On the surface, today's reading from the Book of Exodus looks straightforward: the Israelites are in the wilderness; they can't find any water; Moses asks God for help; God tells Moses what to do; and God provides. It looks like a very simple "hey-God-we-need-help" kind of story, with a happy ending. But let's dig a bit deeper. There's another element here, not as obvious, that has implications for us.

Let's back up. The Israelites have escaped from the bitter yoke of slavery. The Egyptian Pharaoh had sent his entire army, including hundreds and hundreds of chariots, after them. The Israelites found themselves trapped between Pharaoh's army and a large sea. They complained to their leader, Moses: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? … For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." Moses, in turn, cried out to God, and God responded: "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground." Moses did as God directed. He "stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers." The Israelites "walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left." But the Egyptian chariots got caught in the mud, and when Moses stretched out his hand again over the sea, "the waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained." The Israelites rejoiced and sang joyful songs. So, in summary: the Israelites were in a desperate situation; they complained to Moses; Moses asked God for help; God provided; and the Israelites were saved.

Next: The Israelites headed into the wilderness. But within three days they ran out of water. They found a place with water, but it was bitter and undrinkable. So "the people complained against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' He cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet." So: the Israelites were desperate; they complained to Moses; Moses asked God for help; God provided; and the Israelites were saved.

Next: they went further into the wilderness, and they ran out of food. "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and [his brother] Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of

meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'" Moses brought the situation to God, and God said to Moses, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" That evening, "quails came up and covered the camp." The Israelites feasted on the quail, a great source of protein. The next morning, the Israelites woke up to find "a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground." The Israelites called it *manna*, after the Hebrew words *man hu*, which means, "What is it?" "It was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey." So: the Israelites were desperate; they complained to Moses; Moses asked God for help; God provided; and the Israelites were saved.

Are you noticing a pattern here? Desperate situation; complaining; asking God for help; receiving God's provision; experiencing salvation. Three times now it has happened. Here's a fourth:

The Israelites go even further into the wilderness. It's now been several weeks since they left Egypt. "From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded." Traveling by day, camping at night, gathering manna in the morning, and then setting out once again. It gives a new meaning to the words "Give us this day our daily bread," doesn't it?

Then they come to a place called Rephadim, where they face yet another problem: "there was no water for the people to drink." So what do they do? In typical fashion – *they complain*. They're getting quite good at complaining, don't you think? This time, it gets heated; "the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Don't you think they would know by now that it's not *Moses* who is providing for them? He's just *facilitating* their journey. But he's not the one who has *saved* them, three times now. That's *God*. Have any of the Israelites considered the possibility that *maybe* instead of *complaining to Moses* or *quarreling with Moses* they could – or *should* – take their petitions to *God*? What would happen if – instead of *complaining* to a *human* – they were to *pray* to the *divine*?

Moses is starting to get a bit impatient with them. "Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?'" But the people just "complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'" They're *complaining*; they're *quarreling* with him; now they are evening *blaming* him. It's *his* fault, right? No, of course not! Moses is trying to *help* them, not *hurt* them. The Israelite people had spent many decades, more than a century, suffering under the yoke of slavery in Egypt. They had been crying out to God for help and deliverance. God had heard their cries; God had responded to their cries; God had sent them a leader; God had liberated them from slavery and saved them at the sea; God had given them water to drink and food to eat; and now – when they have a water shortage again – what do they do? *Do they remember God's acts of faithfulness?* No! All they want to do is complain and quarrel and blame.

Do you know anybody like that? People who just *complain* and *quarrel* and *blame*?

There is so much that those Israelites have to be thankful for. God has saved them *three times now*. God has been with them *every step* along their journey. God has, quite literally, been their *guiding light*. But instead of seeing the positive things that God has done for them, instead of counting the blessings that God keeps giving them day after day after day, all they can do is see *the negative*. All they can do is focus on *what's wrong* instead of celebrating *what's right*. Don't get me wrong; they do need

water. They're not going to survive if they don't get water. But they *continually* lose sight of what God *has* done, *is* doing, *can* do, and *will* do for them. They continually see the glass as half *empty* rather than as half *full*. What they need – what they *really* need – is an *attitude adjustment*. They need to be able to see the world through more *thankful* eyes. They might need *that* more than they need *water*.

So I ask again: do you know anybody like that? People who see the *negative* more than the *positive*? Who focus on *what's wrong* rather than celebrate *what's right*? Who always see their glass as *half empty* instead of *half full*? Are people like that *pleasant* to be around? No. No, they're not!

"Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me.'" It's no wonder why Moses is getting short-tempered. Wouldn't you? Here you are, trying your best to do good for these people, against what feel like insurmountable odds, and *God keeps providing*, again and again, but these people *whom you are sincerely trying to help* just keep complaining. And quarreling. And blaming. It doesn't matter how much you try, or how hard you work. *Nothing you do* is good enough. Nor does it matter how much *God* does. *Nothing* is good enough for these people.

But God *still* provides. God even provides for people who need a serious attitude adjustment!

"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.'" Remember that part of the story? "In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile; all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died." That was back in chapter 7, in the first so-called "plague" that God inflicted upon the Egyptian people. God continues: "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock.... Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." So the cycle repeats itself one more time. The people were desperate; they complained to Moses; Moses asked God for help; and now God is going to provide, and the Israelites will once again be saved: "Moses did so" — he struck the rock, and water came out — "in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah" (which means "test") "and Meribah" (which means "quarrel") "because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" The answer, as always, is *yes*. *Yes*, the Lord is among them. And *yes*, the Lord is among us as well.

What happens next: the Israelites get attacked by people called Amalekites. Amalek was a grandson of Esau, the brother of Jacob, so essentially these were distant cousins of the Israelites. God saves the Israelites. Then Moses is reunited with his family – his father-in-law Jethro, his wife Zipporah, and his two sons Gershom and Eliezer – for the Israelites are now back in the region where Moses had been living before God sent him to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Jethro gives Moses some very helpful advice (which could easily be a whole sermon unto itself!) and then they continue on their way. Then, "on the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt," they reach Mount Sinai, and they encamp at its base. They are about to have a remarkable encounter with God.

Do you think that will help? Will *experiencing God's marvelous might* motivate them to *adjust their attitude*? Will they ever *stop* their incessant complaining? What does it take for people to see the *positive* more than the *negative*? To celebrate *what's right* instead of grumble about *what's wrong*? To see their glass as *half full* rather than *half empty*? To rejoice in all the *blessings* God has given them, rather than complain about all the ways they think God has *failed* them? *What will it really take?*

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