

Quarreling With God

Exodus 17:1-7 September 28, 2008

The Israelites were on their way to the Promised Land. Moses had successfully convinced them that they should leave their life of slavery in Egypt. He had successfully convinced the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses to let his people go. Oh, he had resisted the role God had been calling him to play, but he finally did what God wanted him to do.

Now, it wasn't an easy trip. There was the problem with crossing the Red Sea and then there was the lack of food in the wilderness. Today's account is of them being holed up in Rephidim and there being no water. And for the third time the Israelites start complaining about their situation. They even suggest that perhaps they were better off as slaves and should go back.

The target of their grumbling is Moses practically accusing him of malfeasance. No question that Moses had made more than his share of mistakes. I mean if he really led them zigzagging across the Sinai for almost 40 year you do have to wonder about his capabilities as a tour guide. It wasn't like they were trying to get to the other side of the then known world. The standard joke has been of course, that Moses, being a man, refused to ask for directions.

So, the Israelites do what they do best – they quarrel with Moses – they are verbally abusive and they wonder about God's presence with them. Moses – “the man who had stood up to Pharaoh and stood down the whole of the Egyptian army now (feared) that his own people (would) stone him!”¹ And Moses fearfully went to God and offered his own complaints about this yet another obstacle in the way of his people trusting him to lead them to the Promised Land. And God again responds as God always seems to in the book of Exodus with (and I love the way William Ritter puts it in his sermon “What Have You Done For Me Lately?”) “(God responded) with just enough of an intervention to quiet things down and keep things moving. No express train to the Promised Land. No clear, flowing stream in the desert. No fleet of bottled water delivery trucks on the horizon (“Look, Aaron, it's the Aquafina man.”) Just a rod and a rock ... a couple of love taps ... and (wonder of wonders) a drinking fountain.”²

If you have problems with the miraculous way God intervenes in the Old Testament, you might find it helpful to remember that the stories are written after the events and their purpose is to convey something about God. This is a religious story. It's not required that the events unfolded exactly the way the story is told. Something significant happened – the people's needs were met and they stopped complaining – and they attributed what happened to be a word or a demonstration from God about their relationship with God. It gave them hope for the future. It reassured them that God was with them.

So, what might this story have to say to us in our day? The purpose of stories in the Bible are not simply so we can marvel at how amazing God's intervention in the history of the Israelites has been. It's also to provide us a mirror up to which we can hold our lives – the situations that surround us. And I think there are a couple of things this story should help us with.

First, we need to take a careful look at the things in life we believe to be limitations – obstacles – initiative stoppers – and see if there's something we're missing. Everyone knows you can't get water out of a rock anymore than you can get blood out of a turnip. Well, that's true if all we see is the rock.

In today's story Moses went to God and God told him to go to a certain spot and strike the rock with his staff. Moses did as he was told and water began to flow. Now, it's not that there wasn't any water there, it's simply that they couldn't see the water, didn't have access to it, didn't know how to tap into it. "The true miracle wasn't water appearing where there was no water – the true miracle was they stopped seeing rock and finally saw water beneath."³

In Richard Bach's paperback Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah he writes: "Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they're yours."⁴

In Piero Ferrucci's book Inevitable Grace he comments: "How often – even before we began – have we declared a task 'impossible'? And how often have we constructed a picture of ourselves as being inadequate? ... A great deal depends upon the thought patterns we choose and on the persistence with which we affirm them."⁵

Let me share with you an example of how this plays out in life – in the life, say, of a church. A Vermont Methodist church was experiencing some decline in the 1960s and '70s. The church's membership rolls included over 800 members in 1963 but by 1982 they were down to an average of around 30 in worship on Sunday mornings. On the back of the church was attached a two-story education building, with a basement, that had been brimming with children and youth in the '60s. The attendance and membership of the church had declined so much they no longer held Sunday School. In order to save some money the thermostat was set at the bare minimum. There really weren't too many signs of life except when they held worship. Some had come to refer to the education building as an albatross – a liability.

And then, in 1983 a new pastor was appointed who was heard to remark: "An empty building? Wonderful! I wonder how we could use this asset."

Not too long after the pastor noticed an advertisement in the local newspaper of a hospital bed that a family was willing to donate to anyone who would pick it up. The pastor arranged for this to be done and had it stored in the basement of the building thought of as an albatross.

The next week the bulletin noted that a bed was available to be loaned free to anyone who might need one. The next week a woman recovering from hip surgery called and asked to use it. That would have been fine except that a week later another person called in need of it also. When the pastor noted the need for an additional bed the following week during the announcements a woman in the church stood up and said she had one in her attic that she would be willing to donate.

Soon the word was out and canes, crutches, walkers, shower seats, wheelchairs filled the liability basement space in the education building. A ministry was born that became known as the Hospital Equipment Loan Program. A volunteer secretary started to work out of the church office every morning to keep the in/out log on the hospital equipment.

The success of the Hospital Equipment Loan Program caused the church to start a Second Hand Clothing Store on the main floor. It was followed with a special-needs pre-school ministry. Then followed an ecumenical Soup Kitchen. The old Educational Building was no longer seen as an albatross, but rather as an asset for the church's Outreach Ministries. You see, the church stopped seeing the rock and trusted God to let the water flow. Oh, did I mention that the average worship attendance now is 150!⁶

If we are to be all we can be – all God believes we can be – all God wants us to be - as individuals and as a church – a community of faith, then we must believe that our faithful God will provide for us abundantly – will reveal to us the water, the possible – when we only see the rock – or, the obstacles – or, the liabilities.

Now, there's another piece of good news this story reminds us of. It is revealed in what happens to the Israelites' question about whether God was with them. How many times in our lives have we faced situations that have caused us to wonder whether God is with us or not? You know, when things like a marriage breaks up or we lose a job or we become aware that we are facing some life-changing health concerns.

It's been my observation that many people believe – as the ancients before us did – that there are two ways to determine whether God is with us or not. Some suggest that if life is easy, is good, then God must be present and on our side. The other is that if life is tough, if it's difficult, then God must not be around – must not be on our side – has forgot about us. I think both are false and let me offer a few comments about why I think the way I do.

How often have we heard someone say: "I know this is God's will for me because everything worked so smoothly. I didn't have a single problem. It has to mean that God is supportive of what I've done – of what I'm doing." Now, it may be true that at times when things go well God is present and is pleased, but it's not a perfect gauge. Living the good life – having good health, a job, a home, plenty of friends, nice neighbors doesn't always mean that God is pleased with us - supportive of our choices - present.

How many situations around us can we name where people are prospering and living seemingly carefree lives that we know to be wrong – evil? How often have we wondered the same as Jeremiah: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" And remember how Job struggled with God around this issue? Remember when he asked: "Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?" And, remember how he went on to complain about how easy it seemed for the wicked – living in safe houses, having healthy livestock, living prosperously, and then going to their graves in peace? (Job 21:7-13)

God sends rain and sunshine on the just and the unjust. God waters the gardens of all of us. God doesn't go through the world and have rain fall on one house and not on the house next door because someone in the house runs a bar or earns a living selling drugs to addicts or stayed out late last night or cheats on their income taxes. We simply cannot determine whether God approves of one person over another because things seem to be going one's way – whether throughout a life or when one thing happens positively in a person's life. Doing wrong and getting by with it doesn't mean that God accepts or approves of the wrongdoing or the wrongdoer.⁷

Then there are those who choose to believe that whenever life gets difficult, well, it must mean that what you are doing is not OK with God – that God is absent, that God doesn't care about you. How often we've acted like the Israelites – something isn't working out, we're struggling (the Israelites were thirsty and they griped about it and then they began to wonder if God could be with them still if they were having such problems). Difficult times in life no more means God is not with us than everything running smoothly means God likes us and is present with us.

One preacher argues this point by offering a summary of some familiar bible stories. He reminds us of the time that after Jesus held one of his open-air classroom sessions by the sea, he sent his disciples into a boat and told them to go to the other side. Now, despite the fact they obeyed, things got a little rough and they feared for their lives. They did what they were told and still faced some adversity.

Then there is the story of Joseph being thrown into prison for a crime he didn't commit. Even though he spent two years in prison it didn't mean that God wasn't on his side. Remember that God later used him to save his nation from starvation.

Oh, and then there is again the story of Job – his wife trying to get him to curse God and kill himself because of all that went wrong in his life – his children being killed, his herds being destroyed, boils all over his body. Wow, if there ever was anyone who had a right to feel as if God had deserted him it had to have been Job. But in the end we learn as Job did that that wasn't the case at all.

And remember Paul's being shipwrecked after setting out to preach in Rome because he believed that's what God wanted him to do? Fourteen days in a storm while doing something God wanted him to do?

And then there was Jesus' own life here on earth. He hung on a cross and while dying for a crime he didn't commit even cried out similar to the Israelites: "My God, My God! Why have you abandoned me?" According to the way some folks see things, Jesus' crucifixion must mean that God was absent – that God did abandon Jesus.

We have to be careful trying to judge everything that happens in life by the apparent facts – by those things we see. We must be very careful not to wonder every time something bad happens to us whether God has left us – whether God cares for us – whether God is punishing us.⁸

Here's where it's at for me, folks: the good and the bad that happens in our lives and in the lives of those around us has nothing to do with whether we are good or bad people – whether God is present or absent. God is present whether good or bad is going on in our lives – not causing both to happen – that is, not causing both good and bad by some spin of a wheel of luck in heaven, but rather, simply present to help us deal with – cope with – make something out of whatever comes our way.

You've heard me say something like this before: God does not sit in an easy chair in heaven and select who is going to die and who is not as a result of a senseless act on our part – God is not sitting on his throne pointing to this person as one in whom cancer cells are going to grow exponentially and toward another and benevolently, arbitrarily, determine the cancer will go into remission – God is not this power in the world choosing which one of us is going to mistakenly rush through a red light and suffer a terrible accident maiming or killing another person while allowing others of us to get away with it.

No, God is present with us – all of us – whenever the good or the bad happens to us – to help us with our guilt (perhaps) – to motivate us to make changes in our lives that might benefit others or ourselves (perhaps) – to help us to see water where we only know rocks to be (perhaps). God simply promises to be with us – that's it – that's what the story reveals to us – tells us – no matter what happens to us – no matter how alone we feel – no matter how rocky the way we walk through life. We can manage because God is with us.

Has God left us when bad things happen to us? Of course not. God's promise is to be with us in the valley of the shadow of death – that means in the presence of evil happening all around us and even to us.

Is God with us when good comes our way? Of course, but not somehow different or more remarkably or uniquely than with others not so fortunate or lucky or blessed. Quarrel with God all you want - complain to God – argue with God – get mad at God - but never forget that God is still with you - still loves you – still cares about you.

Let us pray.

1. Leonard Sweet, “So You Want to Be in the Lead?” Collected Sermons, ChristianGlobe Networks, 2007, 0-000-1415.
2. William A. Ritter, “What Have You Done For Me Lately?” Collected Sermons, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 0-000-2005.
3. Steve Burt, “But You Can’t Get Water Out of a Rock!” What Do You Say to a Burning Bush, (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 1995), 0-7880-0457-3.
4. Richard Bach, Illusions: The Adventures of A Reluctant Messiah (New York: Dell, 1977), p. 100 as quoted in “But You Can’t Get Water Out of a Rock!”
5. Piero Ferrucci, Inevitable Grace (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1992), p. 177 as quoted in “But You Can’t Get Water Out of a Rock!”
6. “But You Can’t Get Water Out of a Rock!”
7. “Is God With You, Or Not?”
8. Ibid.