

Readings

Exodus 17:1–7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1–11; John 4:5–42

I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink. (Exodus 17:6)

Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty...” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” (John 4:13, 15)

When I was in seminary the second year, I was required to take a course called Basic Concurrent Field Education. In “Basic Concurrent,” as we called it, one was supposed to get on-the-job training for pastoral work. By my own initiative and connections, I managed to get myself placed at a residence for persons with AIDS, called Chicago House. (I must have been picturing myself more as a potential chaplain at the time, rather than a potential pastor.)

Well, this was early in the days of the pandemic. Chicago House was an agency generated by the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered community itself, not by any church. In fact, Bonaventure House, now a well-known Catholic venture, was still two years away.

The director of the “Basic Concurrent” program was unimpressed with my initiative and criticized my choice of site for the fact that it was not religiously affiliated. In short, she said I would have to find a religious site or organization to sponsor my work there, in order to have it qualify for the religious requirement of the pastoral care work.

So it worked out that I became the assistant pastor at a Logan Square church where I had been attending, and an assistant house manager at Chicago House.

Much as I got to do what I thought I wanted to do, trying to do both jobs was not a wise idea. I wound up exhausted and overwrought, troubled in spirit, and struggling desperately to understand what God wanted me to do with my ministry.

There was some occasional relief, however. Here’s a snapshot for you that I still think back on, some days.

As the managerial staff, we coordinated outings for our eight residents and volunteers, every once in a while, like any assisted living facility. We would go to museums or the zoo, or out for dinner sometimes.

One time, we all went on a canoe trip. The other coordinators and I were conferring with the canoe rental people and the bus driver who was to meet us at the other end of the float, when the guys started to unload. The first three off the bus were dressed in shower caps, bathrobes, and fuzzy slippers. Somewhere, they’d gotten a hold of hymnals, and they were proceeding down the boat ramp, raucously singing, “Shall we gather at the river.”

I remember laughing so hard I cried. The sunburn from that day faded away twenty years ago, but when I need a recharge of joy, I can still return to that moment by the riverside.

God sneaks up on me sometimes, and I am never quite prepared for the divine sense of humor, or the Almighty’s compassion and grace.

Love leaves me feeling like laughing or crying or both, the way we feel at funerals when we see all the people that we have missed for years and maybe didn’t even realize it. Finally, they are right there with you, and your heart is jubilant to see them, but it is nearly ready to break because of the reason you are finally together. You laugh and cry at almost the same time, because you have to, or else you might go mad.

God, says the writer of Exodus, is a rock, mighty and solid, to whom we may turn for

refreshment – the staff and the water of life which restore us in our living wilderness. The story of Massah and Meribah refuses to be restricted to a mysterious place in the wilderness, four thousand years ago. God comes forth from all sorts of people and comes up to all sorts of people through gifts of love that flow like water. From a great, unchanging Stone flows fresh water. To people outcast and alone, there is a bottomless well of resources.

In the desert, God was revealed in the rock. The people were longing for relief, wondering and fearing: *Did God bring us out here to suffer and die? We were better off as slaves in Egypt than as a free people in this wilderness!*

Encamped in the shadow of a great rock in the middle of nothing-but-being-lost, beyond being thirsty, the Israelites despaired for their lives and gave up on God. God was not there, they accused. God was nowhere. God had abandoned them. Even Moses evidently had lost some of the faith in his omnipotent Friend: as the legend goes, he tapped not once as instructed, but twice, on the rock to provide the Hebrews with water. Thus, dry stone turned burning sands into a sudden oasis.

Similarly, in the days of the Temple of Jerusalem, the altar was hewn of stone, and when Ezekiel preaches the revelation that has come to him of waters beginning at the sanctuary of God, the waters issue from the stony altar, like the waters of Massah and Meribah from that rock. But the people first hearing those words of the prophet knew what we may have forgotten: at that time there was no Temple, no altar for water to issue from, stone or not. But Ezekiel had this vision, and it began his vision of the realm of heaven in the midst of the earth. Waters of life, the prophet insisted, were breaking forth from a place where there was not even a place, from a rock that no longer even existed.

These images begin to help us to understand where God is, how God is among us.

Susan Briehl, professor of the Art of Ministry at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, insisted in a seminar I attended which she led last fall, that water imagery in John is at least as frequent as the light imagery that people have come to associate with it. It bubbles up, over and over again –

- John the baptist (chapter 1),
- the wedding at Cana when water is turned to wine (chapter 2),
- with the woman at the well (chapter 4),
- at the pool of Beth-zatha where Jesus causes a lame man to walk (chapter 5),
- Jesus tells a blind man to wash in the pool of Siloam in order to receive sight (chapter 9),
- he washes the feet of the disciples on the night before he dies (chapter 13).*

And when Jesus dies, a soldier lances him with a spear, and from the side of this man who once told a woman that he was able to give her living water comes not only the blood you would expect, but water as well!

In this way, Jesus completes the imagery of rock and water.

When the Samaritan woman met him at the well, she had not planned to meet God, that day. Far from it. A Samaritan woman of that time and place knew better than to expect that any man she met would speak to her in the open. And this woman, five times divorced and now living with a man out of wedlock, with a reputation such as hers, knew better than to think that

* One might also note Jesus' adventures on the Sea of Galilee, throughout chapter 6; and how he waxed poetic about being "living water" (7:37–38) at the Festival of Booths, which commemorated the Exodus.

any Jewish rabbi at the well would have anything to do with her. This was a man dedicated to a life of teaching, to his own religious leanings, and to ritual purity.

She just came to the well to get some water, to draw some water from the well of Jacob, and when Jesus began to speak with her she naturally responded, as any of us might to someone on the street whom we neither expect to talk to us nor whom we particularly want to talk to. She was pretty rude, but Jesus overlooked that, and actually seems to have teased her: “Give me a drink,” he says.

You see how God can sneak up on a body, just when they are least expecting it? All this woman imagined she wanted was to fill her jar with water and go home. What she received was a jolt of awareness, the water of life, and the hope to live.

God came to her that day, and God comes to us. The Rock of our salvation with the spring of living water can show up at the dog-gonedest times: in fact, no sooner do we thirst than the cup is offered.

So, perhaps this calls for a change in attitude, or for a change in our sense of spiritual appetite. Perhaps we should expect God to be among us. For like the pilgrims at Massah and Meribah we can be pretty snarly and grumbly, or rude like the woman at the well, just trying to get through another day. But, however we are, we are often not realizing that we are even on the journey toward God, so that when we suddenly arrive at our destination it surprises us.

After all, most pilgrims are not that way. Most of them have a stated purpose and a certain expectation that they are going to where God may be found. Pilgrims to Rome or Lourdes or Mecca all know where they are going, and why! The pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock, for another example, knew where they wanted to arrive. And there really is a metaphor for you, for today: a group of people crossing the waters to a new life and dropping anchor at a rock.

We are ourselves truly a pilgrim people, booking passage from this place, this mortal realm, to a new place, a Realm of eternity — a realm which still we can know in this lifetime. And taste, however unexpectedly. Our own pilgrimages carry us through lonely deserts and across vast oceans, so that we might set our feet upon new soil.

Water, water everywhere, bubbling up and ready with life. Sometimes, where we least expected to find it.

A plentiful fountain springs forth from Massah and Meribah always, from Jacob’s well, clambering down from a bus on your way to a canoe float, and from our lives filled to brimming with living water from never-living rock.

It’s always there, that water. Always, all we have to do is take a drink. Amen.