
Testing and Quarreling: Massah and Meribah

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
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The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"

But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

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. 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." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" ---Exodus 17:2-7

Massah and Meribah, testing and quarreling. Testing and Strife.

Last Tuesday, at our Cathedral staff meeting, we read this passage from Exodus as our opening Bible study. We always begin staff meetings with one of the upcoming Sunday lessons. Each week, after we read the passage, the floor is open for anyone to reflect, or comment, or ask a question.

The first question posed last Tuesday was this one: "About these places, Massah and Meribah: Are these real places? Do they still exist today?"

It was a great question. The quick answer is "No." No, they do not exist today. We have little idea where the actual places of Massah and Meribah were even then. They seem to be around Mount Horeb, where Moses struck the rock to obtain water; but several differing traditions exist for the location of Horeb, too. It seems to be another name for Mount Sinai. Horeb and Sinai were two different names, according to two different traditions, for the same holy mountain

But there is a longer answer to the staff meeting question. The longer answer is "Yes." Yes, Massah and Meribah do exist today. They exist today wherever community quarreling exists, wherever testing and strife are in the midst of God's faithful people.

The Exodus stories, short and simple, tell the story of all communities, and of all the communities of God. Here are the Hebrews, who have been delivered from the Pharaoh by Moses. You all remember the general story. They fled Egypt, the

Red Sea opened up and let them pass through. They wander in the wilderness, but they have been saved, over and over again, by God.

Then, when things get tough, they begin to quarrel. First, they complained about being hungry. It is a common complaint in every community. Your fourteen year-old at home is always complaining he is hungry. In the first Christian community, according to The Book of Acts (chapter 6), the Greeks complained that their widows were not being fed enough. Communities are where people are hungry.

In Exodus, chapter 16, before the story we heard today, the Hebrews, too, were hungry. They complained to Moses and Aaron that they wished they had died back in Egypt. So, the glory of the Lord appears in a cloud, sending quails and manna, miraculously to the Hebrews.

But within days, the Hebrews seem to be complaining again. (At least one member at our own dinner table is hungry again, or doesn't like what's for supper tonight.) But this time, in chapter 17, the Hebrews are not hungry; they are thirsty.

Testing and Strife. Testing and strife become the two words that characterize the Hebrews. They complain to Moses, "Give us water to drink." Poor Moses, the great and faithful leader, has to absorb the people's murmuring and complaining again.

So, then, Moses joins the complaining! Moses complains to God! "What shall I do with this people?" he complains, "They are almost ready to stone me."

One of the most difficult features of community is that we quarrel. From the lowest of the people to the highest of the leaders. The least of us quarrel, and even the best of us quarrel. Even the most grateful and faithful of us quarrel.

Isn't it odd how many family arguments occur at the dinner table? Or, at least, in the kitchen, while we are eating and drinking. Consider how our most familiar places become the places where we quarrel. Our most intimate places, where we find great love, are also the places where we quarrel.

Biblical archaeologists believe that Massah and Meribah may have been places of community council and decision-making; because springs, the oases in the desert, were often the sites for contention and lawsuits. That is where people made agreements and brought their cases before each other. They gathered around springs of water.

Those places were certainly the places for community and deep discussion. In today's gospel (John 4), for instance, it is at a well, that Jesus meets the Samaritan woman and engages her in discussion. It was a long discussion that Jesus had with this foreign woman, this Samaritan, a discussion that began with a request for physical water, but which quickly turned to a discussion about living water.

So it is that the place where we get literal, physical water is also the place where we can find spiritual and living water.

But the mystery of finding living water involves a journey. That journey, a spiritual one, often takes us through wilderness. That journey, a spiritual journey, takes us through times of testing and quarreling, within our closest communities, and often with those who love us the most. Testing and quarreling, then, are not the obstacles in our spiritual journeys; they are they the wells, the springs of water, that become sources of life and spirit and truth.

What are we supposed to do with our quarreling and testing and striving? How do we find God in such a universal community phenomenon as quarreling?

In Exodus, chapter 17, God answered Moses' question with a clear direction. God said, "Strike that rock. Open up the rock." Now, most of us might think that a rock would be the last place from which we might find water. That rock is solid and hard and uncrackable, just like that argument, that quarrel is solid and hard and uncrackable. Most of our community arguments seem that way. Uncrackable.

God said to Moses, "Crack that rock." Go right into it. Probe it and split it and enter it. And Moses did. Water poured forth. It is a rock that God uses to reveal water.

The way through our family arguments, through our community quarrels, is to engage them, to meet them face to face, not to run away, not to avoid the stranger, not to hide from contention. Of course, that seems completely wrong, to think that engaging the quarrel is the way to reconcile the quarrel.

But the way through the quarreling and the complaining is just that: it is the way through, not the way around, nor the way of avoidance. God says strike the rock, enter the very rock that seems so impossible to crack. When God is with us, the rock opens, and water, living water, pours forth.

The place where we might not expect to find water at all is actually where a spring of water rushes out.

When God is with us, we find reconciliation in the places where we least expect it. That certainly happened with the Samaritan woman at the well with Jesus, too. She had been taught where to find God, and so she recalled the ancestral argument between the Jews and the Samaritans, "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, here in Samaria, for you say that the place where people must worship is Jerusalem" (John 4.20).

But that is exactly why Jesus was going through Samaria, the place where the Jews did not expect God to be. Jesus was deliberately entering into a foreign place, and speaking with a foreign woman, to reveal God's presence in places and people where God's presence might have been least expected.

And so Jesus replies, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4.24). God's spirit and truth are not restricted, so that they can be found only in the places where we have been accustomed to finding spirit and truth.

God's spirit and truth can be found even at a foreign well. God's spirit and truth can even pour forth from a solid rock in the wilderness. God's spirit and truth might even emerge from our testing and quarreling at the community dinner table.

The spirit and truth of God, the reconciling spirit and truth of God, can be found wherever Massah and Meribah exist. And they exist everywhere. Each one of us has our season of wilderness, and each one of us has our season of quarreling. Ask for God's presence in that season, and then strike the rock, the uncrackable argument, the seemingly endless quarrel. Enter it again, with the presence of Jesus, and "the water that he will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4.14).

AMEN.

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