

Living with Xerophobia

Sermon 52 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 15, 2020

Exodus 17: 1-7

They say that thirst is the most vulnerable human condition. One can survive weeks without food, but without water, the average person can only live a few days. Without proper hydration, our bodies begin to feel tired, sometimes a headache emerges and our mood can change. If we do not reach for water at this point, our mouths become dry and sticky, then we might become lightheaded and may even pass out. As things get worse, breathing and heart rate increase, we begin to feel extremely tired and confused, perhaps even cranky. It's scary to think about and makes us a little more grateful for our easy access to clean water, pretty much anytime we want or need it.

Our basic human need for water does send us into a sort of panic or frenzy anytime there is a possibility that our water supply might be interrupted. Anytime a significant weather event or even the Coronavirus poses a threat, we rush to the stores to buy gallons of water (and in some cases, we stock up on toilet paper). We act out in fear of what might become of us if we have to go without for any amount of time. Some wouldn't call it fear, instead they say it's just plain good sense... planning for the worst and hoping for the best.

These kinds of instincts help us survive. They help us care for our families and make sure we do everything we can to protect ourselves and the communities in which we live. In times like these, we succumb to the reality that we are utterly human. In times like these, we recognize our weaknesses, our limits, and our need for one another.

Like many of our most basic human instincts, our need for water can quickly evolve into an anxiety and fear of what might become of us if we lost access to this most valuable resource. In mild cases, we run to the store to stock up before the supply is gone. We have seen those behaviors this week. In extreme cases we live our whole lives in a state of fear, always needing reserves – just in case – even when there is no real threat on the horizon. When this unrealistic panic turns into longstanding fear, it has a clinical name, Xerophobia.

People who live with Xerophobia have an active and life-altering fear of dryness, of dehydration, of deserts and other dry places. And this fear can cause panic, anxiety attacks... even physical illness for those who live with it. It's interesting, many of the symptoms of xerophobia mirror those of actual dehydration: rapid heartbeat, dryness of mouth, trembling, shortness of breath...

Sometimes it is impossible to distinguish between xerophobia and dehydration.

People living with xerophobia will often avoid dry places. Because of their fear, they will miss out on the experience and the exquisite beauty of deserts like we might find out west or abroad. For those who have been lucky enough to visit some of those desert places, you know

just how much we might miss out on if fear were to prevent us from exploring those sun-dried destinations.

Throughout our history and in our sacred texts, the desert is featured as a place of tremendous spiritual import. In fact, it is almost a character all on its own. With its unwelcoming nature and its uncompromising environment, it is the very setting through which God leads Israel on their way from captivity to freedom. This is the scene we are invited into with today's reading from Exodus.

The desert is the location of Mount Sinai (also known as Mount Horeb) where Moses goes to meet God face to face and it is the birth place of the Ten Commandments. You may also remember the desert is where Elijah flees when his life is in danger, and it is there where he meets God in the sound of sheer silence. And it is in the desert where Jesus meets the Samaritan Woman and offers her living water even as she offers him water to drink.

It seems the desert is where God lives.

But it took a while to figure that out. The Israelites quarreled and complained questioning the path to the promised land and wondering if things wouldn't have been better if they'd stayed back in Egypt. At least there, we knew we had water. At least there we didn't have to feel this thirst.

Little did they know that God was waiting, just around the corner, ready to give them all that they needed.

It took them a while to figure it out, and I wonder if it won't take us a while to figure it out as well.

Here we are, in an unforeseen desert called COVID-19. It is not a wilderness that we might have chosen or predicted but nevertheless here we are. We might have seen the dust on the horizon as the disease spread from Asia to Europe. We might have recognized the drying out of the land as life carried on as usual. Deeper and deeper into the desert we came as the first case entered our county, and then the restaurants up the road, and now the public school system. Many of us are still in shock as we look around in all the empty spaces and begin to cry out, "Is the Lord among us or not?" ... "Where are you, God... Why aren't you helping?"

As we stand in the midst of this new and unprecedented wilderness there are so many things of which we are afraid. We are afraid of financial collapse and widespread illness. We are afraid of getting sick ourselves and we are afraid that we might pass it along to our neighbors. We are afraid of being alone and we are afraid of being together. We are afraid of what might happen if we kept conducting business as usual... and we are afraid of what might happen now that everything is shut down.

Perhaps there is much to fear... standing in the midst of the desert.

It may be tempting to respond in fear which often presents like self-preservation – rushing out to stock up on toilet paper, cashing in investments to try to salvage whatever we can, filling our pantries and hunkering down or maybe it's pretending like there's nothing to be afraid of at all.

While these seem like logical fears, all of these are born out of our own spiritual xerophobia. Our fear of dry, wilderness places. We don't want to go into the wilderness because there our humanity is pushed to the limits, everything seems out of our control, and we come face to face with our fragile human condition. It is an uncomfortable place to be sure.

And as we face this uncomfortable wilderness individually, the very institution that teaches us to have faith in the face of fear also faces an unforeseen new reality. The church which is about bringing people together, serving up bread and wine, greeting with the peace of Christ, and offering a caring embrace to those whom society has deemed untouchable... that church, this week, has been instructed to close her doors... to stop doing the very thing she is called to do. Close it down. Cancel all gatherings. Tell your people to stay home.

And so, we have.

Looking out beyond the camera today I see another wilderness. One where empty pews replace dry sand, and spotlights shine in lieu of a scorching desert sun. In this place, on a day like today, the words from the thirsty Israelites take on new meaning... "Is the Lord among us, or not?"

And then I am reminded that when we step back from this moment, the one we read about in Exodus 17, we can see the bigger picture revealing a God that is teaching the Israelites the most central promise of their desert journey... God is with you.

God is with you as you walk through the driest valley.
God is with you when you cannot find a drop of living water.
God is with you between Egypt and Canaan.
God is with you when you long for the days of the past.
God is with you even when you wonder if God has abandoned you...
God is with you when you cry out in thirst,
God is with you always... ready to provide water from the most unassuming rock.

This week we have seen drops of hope-filled water coming from our desert rocks. Even as the building is closing, we are learning – much like our Israelite ancestors – that God does not reside in our building, but God resides among the people. So we have seen drops of hope-filled water as deacons made calls to church members, listening to fear, anxiety, and support. We have seen drops of hope-filled water as communities pledge to support food banks and make sure that no child goes hungry just because the school cafeteria isn't going to be open for a little while.

We have seen drops of hope-filled water as all of us do our part to insist that social distancing doesn't mean individual isolation and we have seen hope-filled water as creativity flows forth, offering flexibility, generosity, and understanding in places we never thought possible.

...in this season of shutting down and staying home there is a holy, new creation bursting forth within us, around us, and among us.

Perhaps it is time we finally learned not to fear the wilderness, but to face it bravely – together – knowing that God is with us even here. Even now.

Just waiting for us to recognize new creation, the presence of God...
water flowing forth from the rock.