

Will you give me a drink?

Sermon 176 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 12, 2023

Exodus 17:1-7

This week's question is about thirst. When you are feeling spiritually depleted, where do you find spiritual renewal? I did some crowd-sourcing to see where you and others find that renewal.

Some of you said... the beach, the mountains, playing a card game or board game, fishing, listening to Jackson Brown or John Pine or Bach, in the garden, in a coffee shop, looking at a sliced orange, the way it is all connected..., choir practice, and spending time with friends.

Reading over some of your responses and thinking about how I might answer that question I thought about some times when I've really needed and found that renewal. So today, my answer to that question is this: I find renewal in a bag of Doritos, and when I see those blue rest area signs on the side of a highway.

"Road trips are never easy." In fact, many times they bring out the worst in us and highlight some of the most important differences we can otherwise overlook. Like, on a road trip, you quickly learn that there are two types of people. Those that prioritize efficiency over all else - including health and well-being. These people chart their course and organize stops around single locations where one can use the restroom, fill up the fuel tank, and get something to eat (something that can be purchased in a store, without moving the vehicle from the gas pump and then consumed in the car, once travel has resumed).

Then there is the other type of people. They believe in health and understand that one cannot survive in any meaningful way without the occasional fresh vegetable which, let's face it, is just not available in the same kind of place where one might fill up the tank of the car.

Now, these two types of people can get along quite nicely most of the time. They can go about their day-to-day business, they can even live in the same household and even be married to one another for years without ever having the tiniest argument about the things I just named. But when you put them in the same car together for a road trip that lasts more than five or six hours... get ready for some turbulence.

Somebody is going to get hangry. Somebody else is going to have a stomach ache. Somebody is going to need to have a potty break about 20 minutes after a refueling stop. Somebody else is going to request to eat at a sit-down restaurant. And somebody, perhaps yet another kind of traveler, is going to ask from the back seat, "Are we there yet?" Yes, road trips have the potential to highlight our deep-seated differences and bring out the worst in us.

While the Israelites were not traveling with modern-day equipment or pit-stop dilemmas, when I read their wilderness stories I cannot help but feel like I am eavesdropping on an ancient and holy travelogue. These stories have all the right ingredients, sharing the practical/logistical information as well as the thoughts, fears, and blunders the Israelites experience as they move from Egyptian captivity through the long wilderness journey.

You remember the larger story, either from reading it in your Bibles or from watching Charlton Heston play Moses in Cecil DeMille's, *The Ten Commandments*. The people were held in captivity; they were slaves in Egypt until God called Moses to deliver them. Then the plagues came and tried to sway Pharaoh's heart. One by one they came. Lice, locusts, flies, boils, pestilence, darkness... And then the final plague, the one that claimed the life of Pharaoh's firstborn finally opened the gates and ushered God's people to freedom. But this wasn't the freedom they might have expected, one that came just on the other side of the Red Sea. No, this freedom was wrought with trial before triumph, quail & manna before milk & honey, wilderness before promise.

Reading the stories like a travelogue gives us an up close and personal story of what life was like as a whole congregation of people travel this long, unpaved (uncharted?) road. Up close we get to see their fatigue and uncertainty. We get to watch them argue and fuss with one another. We even get to pass judgment on their lack of faith when they begin creating idols for themselves, turning to material objects to satisfy the deeper, spiritual longings. (Remember the whole golden calf incident.) But in today's reading, in this part of their story, it's not even that - they're just simply thirsty. And they share their complaint with Moses. (Remember just one chapter earlier they complained about hunger and God rained down manna.)

So, hearing their complaints again, Moses does exactly what we might expect a loving, faithful leader to do. He turns to God and asks: What shall I do with these people? [implied: I'm doing what you told me to do...] They are almost ready to stone me!"

God replies:

"Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders 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 can drink."

Now, if God hadn't parted the Sea so that the people could walk through on dry land, and, if God hadn't sent Lice, locusts, flies, boils, pestilence, darkness... all in an effort to free the people from that which enslaved them...

And, if God hadn't just made it rain down food from heaven, and, if God wasn't present with them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night... then we might be a little more sympathetic about their complaining.

But at this point, it is easy for us to see that God is going to take care of these people.

God has invested so much in their provision and not only that... in their well-being and satisfaction. God has made a promise to them, a covenant with them. Haven't they seen enough to trust that God will see it through?

... but the people were thirsty, and they complained to Moses about it...

So Moses brought their complaints to God and then he did as God said, and lo and behold, water flowed from the rock. Another miracle... New life[!!!!] from a most unexpected source.

There is a lesson in this story about faithful leadership. About how Moses asked for God's wisdom, God's help... and then took a few elders with him, up the road a bit, in order for God to reveal what God was doing for the people. There is also a lesson in community here... about sharing the journey with other people, trusting them, loving them, and allowing them to stretch us, to teach us new things, and to hold us together when everything seems to be falling apart.

And there is another lesson [this one may be the most important one for us today], this is a lesson about God's continued presence and faithfulness with the people. Even in their thirst, even in their complaining, even in their doubt after everything they'd experienced thus far... even though they couldn't see it yet, God was just up ahead, preparing a stream of never-ending / ever-flowing / living water. And no one ever could have guessed where it would come from. Who could have imagined?! This is a story of freedom, trust, and new life. God is doing something new in every chapter, at the turn of every page!

A story of riding back from the pilgrimage. It had been a remarkable spiritual experience. Connecting with one another, experiencing God's closeness, being stretched in our relationships and in our faith.... But at the end of the trip, when we loaded that bus, we were tired and ready to come home. 12 hours, one day. About halfway into the drive, the people started to get hungry. (Truth is, I was hungry too) So I told the bus driver, and asked that he find a place for us to stop. He quietly acknowledged the request and I went back to my seat and resumed the conversation I was having with the people sitting nearby.

Now, up to this point, the bus driver had been pretty good about finding places with a variety of options for our meals. Not long after, I noticed we were slowing down a little and taking an exit. I looked out the window to see where we were... that's when I saw the blue rest area sign. I asked the bus driver what was going on. He said something to the effect of... "You said y'all were hungry, we've got to be home by this certain time and so, here... get some food, use the restroom, and let's get back on the road."

At this point, I should probably confess to you that I am the second kind of road-tripper. The kind that figures we're going to be in the car for a long time, so what difference does one hour make if it means we can sit down, eat an actual meal with real food (aka vegetables), and then get back on the road? So when I saw this stop, I was not happy. I looked at those vending machines and could not imagine that anything they had to offer would ever quench my hunger and thirst.

I was grumbling and if we'd been back with the Israelites, camping at Rephidim, I would have been nagging Moses to give me some water. And when Moses showed up with a rock in response, I would have been livid.

But I couldn't let all of that show because I was leading these people, not 1 but 2 congregations of travelers from Memphis, Tennessee to Charlotte, North Carolina. I needed to keep the faith and have a positive attitude, trusting God and our bus driver that we were all going to make it home in one piece.

So I pulled Justin aside and told him how I really felt about this stop. (He already knew because this was not our first road trip together). Then I got back on the bus with the other travelers and we made our way down I-40. As the bus moved on I realized that even though our nourishment didn't come from any source I would have chosen or predicted, we had everything we needed right there on that bus. Yes, we had snacks in the form of chips and soft drinks from the roadside vending machines. But what's more than that - we had one another. And we were still growing and learning together - still being stretched and formed by the Holy Spirit (who was also on that bus!)

Soon, those of us who were frustrated and even a little bit angry about the situation quickly experienced those feelings transformed by the laughter shared as the bus moved on and we all settled in for the remainder of the trip.

So, that's how I first discovered the renewing presence of God in a bag of vending machine Doritos at a highway rest stop on Interstate Highway 40 somewhere between Memphis and Charlotte. And now every time I see those blue signs on the side of the road, I remember that sometimes God shows up in even the most unlikely places. Because God is faithful. And God hasn't brought us this far only for us to die of thirst in the desert. We just have to summon the faith to stay the course and remember that things are not always as we expect they will be. After all, we do worship a God who rained down manna and summoned water from a rock.

Who knows what sources of renewal lie ahead?