

**Exodus 17:1-9**  
***“Let There Be Water”***

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Well, good morning again. I’m coming to you today in an unexpected way, and I’m coming to you from an unexpected place. And that’s because it’s been a strange and unexpected week for all of us, and this morning none of us are probably where we would usually be.

But that’s okay. That’s what I want to say right up front this morning: it’s okay. For God’s own Word reminds us this morning that there have been other times—many other times—throughout human history, when we have found ourselves in unexpected places, with few resources, wishing we could turn back to easier times, but realizing we have only to move forward.

Exodus chapter 17 begins with these words, “Directed by God, the whole company of Israel moved on by stages...” Is this a good thing or a bad thing that God is in the wings directing traffic, telling Israel where to go? I guess it all depends upon your vantage point. If you think yourself to be in a place of darkness and despair, having God on hand to direct you where to go could be a great blessing. On the other hand, if you rather like where you are, if things are going well for you where you are, and God shows up to point you in a different direction, you might not like it very much. You might prefer God to sit this one out.

“Directed by God...” Is this going to be a blessing or an inconvenience for Israel? We shall have to wait and see.

What we can see is that wherever Israel is going, they’re not going very fast. The story says, “they moved on by stages.” In other words, it’s going to take time for them to get through whatever they’re going through. They’re going to need patience, to buckle down. If they’re going to survive, they’re going to have to learn to smell the roses.

In the case of Israel, they are going through the wilderness. It’s hot. It’s dry. It’s long days with little rest and tons of restlessness. In the wilderness, you can be moving for hours and still feel like you’re getting nowhere. Maybe we know what this is like. Many of us have

been spending hours, whole days, at home. In the coming week, all of our kids will be home from school, with no other place to go. The museums are closed, the trampoline park is closed, the gym is closed. You go to the grocery store, there's no toilet paper or hand soap or boxed macaroni and cheese, and you think, this might as well be closed, too. We feel stuck...at home...and yet we're told this is where we need to be. And it's hard to see whether it's helping, whether the sickness and disease really is passing.

So let me say again, while all this may feel new to us, while the Coronavirus is new to us, God's own Word reminds us this morning that we have been here before, and it will be okay. Granted, the company of Israel wasn't in the U.S. of A. They were in Rephidim. I couldn't tell you a single thing about Rephidim. I don't know if there were pharmacies and grocery stores in Rephidim or not. What I can tell you is that Rephidim was supposed to be a resting place for Israel. Coming out of the wilderness, they arrive in Rephidim expecting, I'm sure, to be able lay down their load. Instead, there isn't even any water to drink in Rephidim.

Naturally, the people all complain to Moses their leader. "Why did you take us out of Egypt and drag us out here into the wilderness with our children and animals only to die of thirst? Back in Egypt we were slaves, but at least back in Egypt we had water," the people say.

I wonder what you have given up to be where you are today, and what you would say about the value of those things you have given up? It may be too early to tell. You might need to spend a little more time in the wilderness before your hindsight becomes 20/20. Surely, when Israel first left slavery in Egypt there was nothing but joy and freedom songs. They went forth singing that old spiritual which goes, "We are marching in the light of God, we are marching in the light of God." But now it's, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

Take a moment when we're done here and talk around your table, or make a list on your own at home where you are, of those things you feel you've had to give up to be where you

are today, and then spend some time reflecting on what you have also gained in losing those things.

Israel gave up slavery in Egypt for freedom, though it would be more accurate to say they were led out of slavery. Oh! I'm sure the people wanted to be free, but they couldn't make it happen on their own. It took God sending Moses to Egypt to demand their freedom from Pharaoh and then to lead the people out. The people needed help, they needed direction. They'd been in slavery for so long that all they knew was oppression. When Moses comes along and tells them he's going to lead them to freedom, the people must have thought, "This will be easy. After all, nothing could be harder than slavery." But now they're in the wilderness without water. They gave up slavery for a freedom that doesn't feel very free.

The people complain to Moses, and Moses complains to God, "What am I to do with these people? Any minute now they're going to kill me!" It's the mother, standing in the kitchen looking at her child who has just gone and done something very, very bad—smoke coming out her ears. "Just wait till your father gets home," she screams. Suddenly this child is not hers anymore. They belong to their father. That's Moses. "What am I to do with *these* people? They're not *my* people. They're *your* people. *You* directed us out here, God, not me. And we want to know, the people and I want to know, are you with us or not?"

God's solution is to go and do something that makes it abundantly clear Moses is right: the people do indeed belong to God. God's solution is to go and do something that only God can do, something Moses could never do. God's solution is to make water flow from a rock.

I have a cup of water here in my hand this morning, and I wish I could show you how I got it from a rock, because maybe that would make it easier for us to believe God is with us. In our individual wildernesses of restlessness and uncertainty, of sickness and need, God is with us. But I didn't get this water from a rock. I got it right out of the faucet in my kitchen. Which isn't nothing. It's a reminder that there are signs of mercy all around us.

I'll leave you with a story about my neighborhood. All of us being home more right now, my neighborhood has taken on new meaning for me, and yesterday I was out in my backyard with my dog, Quimby, when my neighbor, Cheryl, came along walking her dog, Briggs. Cheryl just got Briggs. He's a one year old rescue, and she was glad to let him be able to run around free in my fenced-in backyard for a bit. He and Quimby were running back and forth chasing sticks, until at one point Briggs took one of Quimby's favorite toys in his mouth—this donkey that has a tennis ball attached to him by way of a rope. When Quimby saw Briggs playing with her toy, she tried to get it from him, but Briggs being bigger and faster than her, she could not. So she did the gracious thing and completely ignored him! She literally turned her rear-end to his face and laid down. She didn't move again until Cheryl called for Briggs to come and be leashed back up for his walk home, at which point I took Quimby back inside, not thinking at all of what had become of her toy.

The next morning when I took Quimby out to do her "business," she spotted her donkey in the middle of the backyard and ran over to pick it up. Except when she got to it, she just stood there over it, sniffing the donkey. I said, "Come on girl, get your toy, let's go in." But she wouldn't come, nor would she pick up her donkey. I could tell she wanted to pick it up, except it smelled like a thief. It smelled like Briggs. Plus, it looked like it had gone through the ringer. It was dirty and slimy, and didn't look at all like the donkey she once knew. "Come on girl, take it or leave it," I demanded. She began to walk away, leaving the donkey behind. Then, at the last second, she turned back, took it in her mouth, and with a look that said, "I guess this will have to do," she followed me back inside.

My friends, there are signs of mercy all around us, and they will do. As near as the water that runs from our faucets, and the walls that keep us warm at night, and the bits of food we do have in our cupboards, and the time we get to rest our bodies and souls, and the half-chewed dog toys out in the backyard that, despite not looking new anymore, still belong to us. There are signs of mercy all around us, signs that God is surely with us, that new life is coming, and everything will be okay. Thanks be to God.