

Some of you know that when I was in college, every summer I worked as a whitewater rafting guide for a company in northwestern Maine. It was a great job; didn't pay much, but if you could live off of deli meat for 3 months, it was a great job. Most of the trips I guided went down the Kennebec River. Now if you've ever gone whitewater rafting on the Kennebec River before than you know it's a dam controlled river. This means that the river doesn't change much from day to day. Assuming there isn't a draught, the dam is opened up every day to release the same amount of water—about 4,200 c.f.s. That's 4,200 cubic feet of water per second. To put this in perspective for you, a cubic foot is about the size of a basketball. That doesn't sound very big, but if you think about sitting in your rubber raft and having 4,200 basketballs rushing by your every second, it's rather big!

The fact that the Kennebec is a dam controlled river makes it a great river to learn how to guide on because the water levels don't change very much, which means the contours of the river are predictable. You'll always know where the rocks and rapids are. However, in late spring in Maine there's also a lot of rain, which means that the first few trips down the river each year are usually totally unpredictable. I remember my first trip ever as a guide. It was a Saturday morning in early June. We would drive, all the guides and customers for that day, on a bus from our base camp to the Put-in Station, where you have to report the number of customers you are taking down the river that day. At the Put-in Station you also find out what level the water is running at for the day. On this particular day, the water was running at 10,000 c.f.s.

Now I'd been training on the river every weekend since early April. I'd logged close to 50 trips down the river already. But never as a guide, in my own boat, with paying customers, and never with 10,000 basketballs rushing by me every second!

We parked the bus and everyone grabbed their gear and clamored off. While the customers started getting their lifejackets on, my boss pulled all the guides together. Most were seasoned guides who couldn't wait to get on the water. With twice as much water than usual to go on, they knew some of the rocks would be totally washed over, causing the typical rapids either to be twice as big or to disappear altogether. Meanwhile, this also

meant that in spots where there might not have been any rapid before, you would now have a rapid.

“Listen up,” my boss said, “this is big water. We’re going to stay in a straight line today. If you’re not sure where to go, just follow the boat in front of you. Unless that boat flips, in which case, go a different way.” That wasn’t much consolation for me.

Whitewater rapids are rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being a ripple and 5 being something you might want to hold on for. The Kennebec River is mostly class 3 and 4 rapids, with one set of 5. Another thing to know is that when I was 19, I weighed little more than I weigh now, which meant precious little was going to keep me in the boat. Fortunately for me, on the river that day was a group of 6 men. All from Boston but originally from India, they spoke hardly any English. But together they probably weighed at least 1500 lbs. and they were going to be my crew. My boss figured that if nothing else, they would help anchor me and my boat in the water. There was just one problem: my crew didn’t know this, and standing at the edge of the river looking me over, all they could think to say was, “New guide please.” But I was it. I was all that was available and they’d have to trust that, despite all appearances, I could handle the river, and the river could handle me.

When we came into the first rapid of the day—*Taster Rapid*, so named because it was supposed to give you a little taste of coming attractions—we got way more than a taste of water. A typical class 1 rapid, Taster was more like a class 3. When the boat hit the rapid, the weight of my crew in the front acted as something of a catapult that sent me flying from the back...to the front...to out. Before my toes could barely hit the water, though, they had me hauled back in. “We not lose you! We not lose you!” I didn’t know how to tell them that they were probably better off without me.

We made it down the river just fine that day. I don’t remember anyone else but me needing to be rescued. When we reached our take-out point I asked the one person in the group who spoke some English what they thought about it all. He said, with a half-smile, “I thought you might get us all killed. But I was sure the river would save us.” I was sure the river would save us. This is the kind of thing Moses must have thought while standing in the desert wilderness listening to the Hebrews complain.

“What did you go and bring us out here for?” they say to him. “There’s no water, no food, no shelter. Did you bring us out here just to kill us? We were better off back in Egypt.” Back in Egypt of course the Hebrews had water, food, and shelter, but they had no freedom. They forget that as Pharaoh’s slaves, their water, food, and shelter came at a terrible price. You see, this is what happens when our bodies have been used and bruised—when we’ve been forced to make bricks without straw for so long—we no longer care about what is good for us. We can no longer tell the difference between the comforts of bondage and the comforts of freedom. “What did you go and bring us out here into the wilderness for?”

It’s worth noting that Moses has no response for the people. It may be because Moses himself is thinking the same thing. Remember, it wasn’t Moses’ idea for him to be the one to lead the people out of Egypt. It was God’s. Moses actually tried to fight God on it, to tell God that he wouldn’t be a very believable guide, but when God wouldn’t give up, Moses gave in. Now, out in the middle of nowhere, with no one feeling any freer, Moses has his own complaints to voice, and he goes straight to God with them. “What shall I do with this people? They’re hungry, they’re thirsty, they’re not feeling safe, and by the way, I’m not either. It’s not enough God, it’s not enough for me to be out here with them. They want to know, are you also with us?” And God tells Moses to go strike a rock and to watch the water flow.

It’s one of those stories that makes me wonder if the Bible is actually true or not, with its stories about water flowing out of rocks. I mean that didn’t really happen, did it? I don’t know. But don’t you think it’s the kind of thing we need to have happen in our world today?

What we’re talking about today, whether we realize it or not, is power and authority, and who has it and where does it come from. This is what the 6 guys in my boat wanted to know. Do you have the power and authority to get us safely down the river? This is what the people wanted to know from Moses. “By whose authority have you brought us all the way out here into the wilderness and just how do you plan to keep us alive?”

This is what I hear us asking really in our own country today about healthcare and white supremacy and whether it’s patriotic to sit, kneel, or stand for the national anthem.

We're asking, who has the power and where does the authority to decide come from? And just once, just once, I wish someone would stand up and humbly answer, it doesn't come from me. Just once I wish someone would respond with more than ultimatums and blame. Just once I wish someone would pick up a stick and dare to strike a rock, to see what God can do instead. Because the power and authority rarely comes from those of us who think we have it.

Where does the power come from? Jesus gave a most curious answer to this question in our gospel reading today. When talking about where John the Baptist got his authority to go around preaching the forgiveness of sins, Jesus doesn't say that John got his authority from God, reminding us perhaps that we should never be so presumptuous as to think God is in our side. Nor does Jesus say that John's power came from any human being, reminding us never to be so presumptuous as to think we can do for ourselves. Instead, Jesus tells a story about tax collectors and prostitutes and how when John came—dressed only in camel hair and eating wild thistles like a donkey—when John came preaching the forgiveness of sins, the tax collectors and prostitutes believed what he had to say. They believed that even though in the eyes of the world they were the worst of the worst, the message that God forgives and loves was a message for them. They believed that even though they were a hundred miles deep in a wilderness, feeling lost and powerless with no signs of life anywhere, it was not too late for them. They believed—the tax collectors and the prostitutes—they believed (can you believe it?) that these are the moments when someone might pick up a stick, hit a rock, and the very love of God will come forth. Amen.