

Exodus 17:1-7

Apparently, God's people in the Old Testament had not passed the test to become Eagle Scouts; they didn't know how to find water in the desert. They also, apparently, had not passed the Dale Carnegie course on "How to Win Friends and Influence People;" they didn't come to Moses asking for water—they quarreled, and grumbled, and were downright obstinate about it...so much so that Moses named the place Meribah, which means "strifeful and contentious."

But this wasn't the first time. Shortly after their huge Red Sea victory over Pharaoh, the Israelites grumbled because the waters were very bitter at Marah. Then they grumbled because there was no food to eat. Each time God provided. But not long after, here at Meribah, they lost patience again when they became thirsty. Only a few months of their forty-year journey had passed. If this was a preview of what was to come, it was going to be a long forty years for Moses.

Parents can feel that way (especially mothers) after many sleepless nights of feeding their newborn baby. Moses didn't hear a crying child night after night in the desert, but his nights were probably just as sleepless as a worn-out mother because the Israelites were demanding the same thing from him—something to eat, and something to drink—and they wanted it now!

The typical way to approach this text would be to compare us to the Israelites; to remind you that we grumble just as they did; that we need to repent of our impatience, and point out that God provides for us just as He provided for them in the desert. "Perhaps," I could say, "We should rename this place. Instead of calling it Christ Lutheran Church, we ought to call this place Meribah—'strifeful and contentious.' That's the name Moses used, and we can be just as impatient, just as obstinate, just as full of strife and grumblings as those Israelites were." Meribah, Missouri. Defiance is the name of the town just down the road, so why not? We've earned the name, haven't we? Meribah? Even though our numbers are few, we can complain and bicker with the best of them. When the money isn't there to pay the bills, instead of reaching down deeper into our pockets and giving more, we bicker about what others are not giving to the Lord. When someone in the church does something that offends us, even if they are unaware of it, we hold a grudge and refuse to speak with them about it. Even if it divides the congregation our sinful pride does not let us back down.

Meribah. We've earned that name, haven't we? In fact, couldn't that name be given to our homes as well? Because at times our homes are full of strife—mom and dad, brother and sister divided against each other...and we carry that strife with us to church, and to work, and to school so that even our lives could be renamed Meribah.

As I said, this would be the typical way of approaching this text in Exodus 17. But perhaps we're not so typical. I'm going to suggest to you something out of the ordinary—that it would be a good thing to call this place Meribah; that it would be good if we were like those Israelites in their grumbling, and complaining, and impatience. How can I say such a thing? Because they were thirsty and they demanded that God give them water to drink. Oh that we had such a thirst here for the living water of the Word of Christ!

A young pastor in North Dakota led his first Bible Study with a ladies group in the congregation, and they were a little upset. Why? Because he stopped teaching them after thirty minutes was up. They wanted; they demanded that he teach them the Word of God for a full hour. Nothing less than that would do. I suppose that young pastor felt a little like Moses. His people were grumbling at him because they were thirsty. I don't think they were about to stone him, but they were not satisfied with anything less than a full drink of living water every time they studied God's Word.

Moses didn't realize how blessed he was. At least his people were thirsty and they knew it, and they came to him for water. No, they didn't use the best people skills with him, but what a blessing to have a congregation that realizes what it needs and demands that its need is satisfied.

I cannot teach you, here at Christ Lutheran Church, to become thirsty. I cannot teach you to hunger for the Word of God. You can give a drink of water to a man, but if that man is not thirsty, he won't drink it. You cannot teach someone to hunger and thirst. If you thirst for God's living Word only one Sunday a month, I cannot make you thirst for it every Sunday. If you hunger for Jesus' body and blood in His Sacrament only four to eight times a year, I cannot teach you to hunger for it every time it is offered.

I can offer the living water in Bible Class each Sunday morning, but I cannot make you come. I can preach God's living Word here week after week, but I cannot make you come, and sit, and listen. You can't teach hunger and thirst. Either someone is hungry, or they're not. Either someone is thirsty, or they're not. How blessed Moses was that at least that congregation of Israelites was thirsty. How blessed is the pastor and the congregation where God's Word is desired; where Christ's flesh and blood is hungered for; where the people cannot get enough of Christ, the Living Water.

How blessed is that mother who has to get up night after night to feed her crying child, because a child who is hungry and thirsty is alive. There is nothing wrong with his stomach, and his lungs, and his heart. He has not succumbed to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. It may be a sacrifice to have to feed her crying baby, but what a blessing to have a thirsty baby to feed. She may want to rename his bedroom, Meribah, because her child is so demanding of her...but we're seeing, aren't we, that Meribah may be a good name after all?

The cross at Calvary we can call Meribah, for there was no place on earth more strifeful and more contentious than that. It was there that God was full of strife against His Son for you. It was there that all of our quarreling, and complaining, and sinful anger found a home within the flesh of Jesus. Meribah was a hill outside Jerusalem because there Jesus cried out, "I thirst!" It was a thirst that reached deep down into His soul. He thirsted for you. He thirsted for your forgiveness and your salvation. He thirsted to take your sins and suffer your punishment in hell.

And so God struck the Rock. As Moses struck the rock at Meribah in the desert to quench the thirst of the Israelites, so God struck our Rock, Jesus Christ. He struck Him with the rod of His anger and wrath to quench Jesus' thirst for you, and your thirst for Him. Jesus was struck down on the cross for you. He felt the rod of God's punishment in your place.

The spear struck Him in His side, and from His side there now flows for you the living waters and the sacred blood which cleanses all your sins.

I cannot teach you to thirst for that water. But if you are thirsty, that living water is here for you. I cannot teach you to hunger for Christ's body and cleansing blood. But if you do hunger, Christ gives you here His life-giving blood and sacred body. If you are not all that thirsty, I'm not angry at you, but I will pray for you that God creates within you a deep hunger and thirst for the living Word of Christ.

I need the very same water that you need. I need the same cleansing blood that you need. And these are here now for you. God gives us, together—pastor and congregation, His living waters in Christ. They come into your ears as you sit in the pew, and they come into your mouth when you come up to Christ's altar. And because they come to you, you are forgiven—for your bickering and complaining you are forgiven, just as I am; for your quarreling and strifefulness you are forgiven, as I also am.

And so drink, dear thirsty child. Drink, dear blessed son and daughter of God. Your Savior is here for you. He forgives you. He gives you His life-giving water. "If anyone is thirsty," Jesus calls, "Let him come, and continue to come, to Me and drink." Amen.