

## Exodus 17:1-7

Where is God when a tsunami destroys more than ten thousand lives? Where is God when a brutal dictator attacks his own people? Where is God when troubles and sickness make life difficult for me and for my family? “Is the Lord among us or not?”

A Christian ought never to ask such a question. We should have the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who proclaimed with confidence, when threatened with the blazing furnace before them, that even if God did not deliver them from the fire, they would still trust only in Him. Rather than asking, Where is God? when troubles come, we should ask, Where is my faith? God has not moved...have we?

The Israelites under Moses' leading did not simply put God to the test by asking if He was among them or not, they did so with anger in their hearts. They were thirsty. At a place in the desert called Rephidim there was no water. They failed to trust. They turned on Moses so that he feared for his life. For these people, water became the litmus test to determine whether God was among them or not. No water...no God. If God is truly among us, we would have water to drink.

I want to draw your attention for a moment to our Gospel reading in John 4. Jesus sat down beside a well in the region of Samaria. The woman He met, along with all the townspeople, had plenty of water to drink. For two thousand years this well had sustained the people living there. They had water, but they did not have God. Until Jesus came to them that day, they had plenty of water to drink, but they did not have, or even know, the true God. John 4 shows us that water is a very poor litmus test.

What litmus test do we use to determine whether God is among us or not? Our health? If my health is good, God is with me. But if my health fails, why has God abandoned me? Our finances? If I have enough money to pay the bills, God is taking care of me. But if life becomes a terrible struggle, if my job fails and the money runs out, God must have left me to fend for myself. How about our church? If our congregation is growing and being faithful with their giving and serving, God is surely among us. But He must not be with us if we become stagnate, and stale, slowing to a crawl.

Rather than putting God to the litmus test; rather than asking whether God is with us or not, we should ask whether or not we are with God. Am I with God when I doubt His care and concern? Am I with God when I grumble about my troubles? Am I with God when I keep questioning the way He leads me?

For the Israelites it's pretty clear--they were not with God. They grumbled at Him. They turned against His servant. They were not with God, but He was still with them. He told Moses to take his staff and to strike the rock at Rephidim. After striking it, water flowed out of the rock for the people to drink.

So did God pass the test? By giving them water to drink, did God prove that He was with His people? No. God showed that He was with His people by commanding Moses to strike the rock. St. Paul tells us in First Corinthians that the rock was Christ. When Moses struck the rock in the desert, this was a sign pointing to Jesus. At a place called Calvary he would be struck. Struck with rods and whips, struck with spit and words of accusation, struck with sharpened nails, struck in the side with a soldier's spear. God did not tell Moses to gently pat the top of the rock at Rephidim; He told him to strike it with his staff because this is what would happen to Jesus.

But that's not fair, if you give it some thought. The rock was minding its own business. It was not grumbling, the people were. The rock did not have an anger issue with God, the Israelites did. If anything should have been struck, it should have been the people. God should have told Moses to strike the people with his staff and then He would give them water to drink. But no, the innocent rock sitting there--it's the one that ends up being struck.

And so it is with Christ. We are the grumblers, the complainers. We are the people with anger issues. We put God to the test. We doubt His words. We fail daily to live as His people. We are the ones who deserve to be struck--struck with God's wrath, struck with His angry hand. And yet God strikes the Rock instead. Jesus is struck in your place. Though completely innocent, Jesus was struck down and left to die on a cross, and you and I, the guilty ones, are declared forgiven.

That staff...the one which struck the rock, is the same staff Moses used to strike the waters of the Nile River. This was the first of many signs and plagues against Pharaoh. And upon striking the Nile with his staff the water turned to blood. In Rephidim, after striking the rock with the staff, water flowed, not out from under the rock, but out of the very rock itself. Does this not point us to Christ? When the staff struck the Nile...blood. When it struck the rock...water. And when the soldier struck Jesus' side with his spear, what came out? Blood and water.

Jesus was struck for you, and so now for you, out of His side, flows the blood and water of His Sacraments. And now we come to the real litmus test. This is the one God gives us to show that He is with us. Where the blood and water are flowing out of Jesus' side, there God is at work; through these things the Lord is among us.

The woman at the well at first did not understand. The living water was not down in the earth, but was flowing into her ears out of the very mouth of Jesus. As the water flowed out of the rock and the people were able to drink, so from Jesus today there flows to you the water that gives life and the blood which cleanses all your sin. God is with us, for Immanuel, your Lord, is speaking His words of living water into your ears right now. That same water of life flowed from Jesus' side and was poured over your head at the baptismal font. And from His side, as often as you take and drink from His cup, that cleansing blood flows from Jesus for you.

When troubles do come, therefore; when sickness overwhelms; when doubts about whether God is with us and for us enter into our minds, know this first of all--God is not striking you with punishment. Jesus was struck already for you. And there in the wounds of your Savior you will see the proof of His love and mercy; that He has not abandoned you; that He is with you always even to the end of the age.

Those wounds happened once, but the blood and water which flows from Jesus' wounds is here for you always. Whether you have been faithful, or faithless; whether you have good health, or are in poor condition; whether troubles abound in your life, or even if they do not right now, Jesus' living water and His cleansing blood is here for you. It is here for grumblers like us. It is here for people like us who fail to live as we should. God here and now forgives you, each and every one of you. He does not care what you have done in your life. His Son was struck for you. He was wounded on the cross, and you, God declares forgiven.

I do not know whether or not your health will improve; whether or not your situation in life will get better. But I do know what I here proclaim...God is with you, He is for you, He is not against you.

And in Jesus, your Rock, whose words are eternal life and whose blood cleanses every guilty stain, you have, from God, forgiveness for all your sins. Amen.