

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel 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 may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Matthew 21:23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin', we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

Sermon: Rocks, Rivers, Real Refreshment

Last week we were in New Jersey for the baptism of our great niece Cate. This was rural NJ, out near the Delaware Water Gap, and as we left the church a big black bear, about half the size of our car, scurried across the road in front of us. Now a bear at a baptism is not the same as the dove of the holy spirit that we often see in church art - but this was New Jersey - and a bear has got to be a good sign - don't you think?

Not that we need good signs - it was a very happy day. The baby, who was three months old, only cried when the water got in her eyes. But it was a different service than we're used to - it was a Lutheran Church and seemed closer to the Roman Catholic service than to our congregational way.

We were asked to renounce Satan and all his empty promises- which always brings me back to Godfather I, and we were prompted to recite the Apostles Creed:

Do you believe in God the Father?

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;

he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen

Also there was a long prayer about water - the waters of creation, the waters of the flood, the waters of the Exodus and the wilderness, and the waters of the Jordan where Jesus was baptized by John. And that was where I thought the baptism serviced keyed into the texts which we read this morning - the story of Moses making water flow from a rock to quench the thirst of the Israelites, and the story of Jesus taking on the authorities with questions about John and the authority of his baptism.

One thing I missed in the Lutheran service which we do here was the pouring of water as we say: : Water cleanses, purifies, refreshes and sustains. Jesus Christ is our living water.

A friend of mine once sent me a poem from the Shaker Community at New Lebanon, NY - up near Route 22, just north of the Mass Pike. The poem - really a hymn - is from an 1830 manuscript:

Lord, give me of thy living bread,
On manna may my soul be fed,
That heavenly manna from above,
The gifts of God and mother's love
Give me that living water, too,
Refresh my soul with heavenly dew,
I want an everlasting store
That I may drink and thirst no more.

The mention of manna, of water, this hymn also draws on themes from the sojourn of the Israelites in the wilderness with Moses and the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan by John.

Here's how it sounded when the Shakers sang it.

The Prophet Isaiah said:

Isaiah 55:1-3 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

So from ancient times, scriptures reflects this desire for spiritual refreshment to quench a thirst of heart, soul, and spirit. People sense that although there may be material comforts in the world around them, their inner life can still be a wilderness, a dusty place with precious little satisfying food or drink.

We are in the middle of an election season, surrounded by images, information, advertising and analysis. So why do I feel like I am wandering in a wilderness of sound bites, marketing, and manipulation? The think I thirst for most is a clear drink of the truth, spoken with authority - something, someone who breaks through all the political blather and blogging. Just a drink of truth every now and then would be most refreshing, but how wonderful it would be if it was a steady stream.

I think that was how many people related to Jesus in his world - a world where religious teaching had become a tool of social privilege and the only stream that flowed steady from the leadership was self-serving hypocrisy.

When people heard Jesus speak, they marveled at his words - what is the comment Matthew shares after the Sermon on the Mount? Matthew 7:28-29 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

People still marvel at the words of Jesus, he still speaks with authority. If we want to be cleansed, if we want to be refreshed, if we want to be sustained, we must drink from the water that springs from the rock of Christ our Lord.

This morning we gave Bibles to our children. It is one of the ways we keep the pledge we make in the ritual of baptism - to help them grow in faith. But a bible unopened on a shelf does no one any good. And if you and I are not drinking from that spring of truth, then it will be hard to invite the children to take a sip.

Moses took a staff in the wilderness and struck a rock and water flowed and all the children of Israel were refreshed and saved from dying of thirst. Our job is much simpler - we only need open the book and share the truth of Christ, our rock and our salvation. The water of Jesus Christ, the water of his baptism, the water of his teaching, the water of his wounded side - this is the water that cleanses, purifies, refreshes, and sustains us.

Give me that living water, too,
Refresh my soul with heavenly dew,
I want an everlasting store
That I may drink and thirst no more.