

“THE BACK-TO-EGYPT COMMITTEE”**Rev. Becky Stephens****Text: Exodus 17:1-7 NLT****God’s Word: Exodus 17:8-16 NLT*****Exodus 17:1-7 NLT***

17 At the LORD’s command, the whole community of Israel left the wilderness of Sin and moved from place to place. Eventually they camped at Rephidim, but there was no water there for the people to drink. ² So once more the people complained against Moses. “Give us water to drink!” they demanded. “Quiet!” Moses replied. “Why are you complaining against me? And why are you testing the LORD?” ³ But tormented by thirst, they continued to argue with Moses. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Are you trying to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?” ⁴ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “What should I do with these people? They are ready to stone me!” ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, “Walk out in front of the people. Take your staff, the one you used when you struck the water of the Nile, and call some of the elders of Israel to join you. ⁶ I will stand before you on the rock at Mount Sinai. Strike the rock, and water will come gushing out. Then the people will be able to drink.” So Moses struck the rock as he was told, and water gushed out as the elders looked on. ⁷ Moses named the place Massah (which means “test”) and Meribah (which means “arguing”) because the people of Israel argued with Moses and tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD here with us or not?”

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On a regular basis, we gather here to fellowship with one another, to pray together, to study and learn together, and to worship as one body. Part of our covenant as a gathering of Christian believers is to journey together as disciples of Jesus Christ. This can mean a lot of things: it means we hold one another accountable, it means we celebrate together in the midst of life’s joys, and walk with one another in times of grief. We are meant to be a voice of strength for one another in the midst of doubt.

It is what we pledge or covenant to do every time we welcome a new member or baptize a child or even an adult. We commit to surrounding that person with love and support. We commit to helping them grow in their faith and in their love of God. We commit to teaching them the ways of God.

Though we rarely admit it because we perceive it to be a sign of weakness, doubt is something that plagues us all from time to time. Which is why we have come here, to the middle of the Exodus story this morning. That question of the Israelites, “Is the Lord really among us or not?” is one we have probably all asked at least once in our lifetime. Really, this is the enduring question of all human beings.

But why were the Israelites asking this question? At this point, God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, walked them across a sea on dry land, and destroyed Pharaoh's army; it would seem that they should know better! And maybe they should, but again, the Israelites were not asking a question that hasn't been asked a million other times by a million other people down through history. So what was going on with the Israelites at this point in their history that caused this uncertainty about God's presence with them?

As you know, the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt for many generations. What do we know about slavery? We know that when you are enslaved, your life is not your own, right? It's not just your work that is dictated to you. Certainly, long, hard days of labor are a central aspect of slavery, but slaves are told where they will live, what they will wear, what and when they will eat, and what time they will go to bed. In general, slaves are given what they need: a place to sleep, clothes to wear, and food to eat, but all of that is provided on the master's terms.

So, though a slave may not be able to share a home with his family, he knows he will have a place to sleep. Though a slave may not like the food, she knows she will be fed. That has been the only life the Israelites have ever known. Now, they have been delivered from slavery in Egypt, but they find themselves wandering in the "wilderness," where there are inadequate supplies of food and water.

Something they have counted on day-in and day-out can't be counted on anymore. And as the Israelites' stomachs begin to rumble and their tongues parch, they start to grumble against Moses, wondering if he had just brought them out of Egypt to die in the middle of nowhere. Now that God has brought them out of slavery, they are wondering why God isn't continuing to take care of them.

I'm sure it seems a little strange to think that the Israelites couldn't grasp God's continuing presence with them after God had managed to get them all out of Pharaoh's grip. But, it seems to me, that coming out of a life of slavery, it would be difficult to trust in *anything*, much less *anyone*. Certainly, thirst is the presenting problem here in this time of wilderness wandering, but I think there was a greater issue among the Israelites, a problem of trust. The Israelites felt abandoned and betrayed. They couldn't believe that God would provide for them what they needed, and so ultimately they started testing God because they couldn't trust that God was even with them.

But look at how the Israelites dealt with their problem of trust. They didn't go to God with their complaint, did they? They started complaining to Moses. They felt they had put their trust in a faulty leader who had led them in the wrong direction. After all, God had not promised them a dry, desert land with no food and water. God had promised them a land flowing with milk and honey! How could they ever be hungry or thirsty in such a place? They wouldn't be, so clearly, they concluded, they were in the wrong place! And so, in their tired, hungry, thirsty, miserable state, the people rebelled. They decided that Moses had led them astray, and not only that, they decided trusting in God was a big mistake, too! So the Israelites did what we all do when we are tired, hungry, thirsty, and feeling lost, they started whining and complaining. They formed the "Back-to-Egypt Committee" so to speak.

Am I wrong? When life isn't going the way we think it ought to be going, we quickly become dissatisfied, maybe even angry and resentful. We start to wonder if God is really with us, much less

listening to our prayers. And then the complaining starts. The funny thing is, though, we don't want to take our issues directly to God. Somehow, grumbling to God seems, well, inappropriate.

So instead, we turn to the next best thing: each other. God had delivered the people out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea on dry land, protected them with the pillar of fire and the column of cloud, and the people said it wasn't enough. Moses was not doing enough for them. Moses, who had so reluctantly taken this post, and yet so adeptly led the people just as God willed, was now faced with a bunch of whiny, angry, tired, thirsty, hungry, and disappointed people.

Why do we do this to each other? It's like beating a dead horse. We could turn to God, put our trust in the Lord. But instead, we decide that a better use of our time and energy is to attack one another.

Look at what happened when Moses began hearing the bitter complaints of his fellow Israelites. He went straight to God. And what did God do? God instructed Moses on exactly how to provide the needed water for the people. In fact, God's response is brilliant. Moses is the one receiving the complaints, so Moses is the one that makes the water flow, but when that rock bursts open, there could be no question that God was giving the people their water. God wanted to provide for the people what they needed, but God also wanted them to see that their leader was doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing; no need to complain against him or to put God to the test.

You know, as I think about it, we really are terribly bold to imagine that if God is really God, then God ought to operate according to *our* demands. Yet, when we grumble and complain, that is exactly what we are doing! We are in essence saying that God is *not* God, otherwise God would be doing things the way we want God to do things.

In fact, the Bible tells us that complaining is a sort of "back-handed" way of saying that God is not faithful. Can you imagine? But that's exactly what the Israelites were doing here; *"The people of Israel argued with Moses and tested the Lord by saying, 'Is the Lord here with us or not?'"* Not only were they implying that God was *not* God and that God was *not* faithful, they were questioning whether God was even with them anymore!

And we do this all the time, too! We grumble and complain and wonder and doubt. But of course God was with them. And God is with us. In whatever situation we find ourselves, God is with us!

You see, if this story proves anything, it's that God wants to provide for us. There is no need to whine and to complain; to put God to the test, or to feel as if God is not there. God will give us all that we need to sustain life (though sometimes nothing more). If we don't like the way something is going, then maybe we should step back and reevaluate the situation, reminding ourselves of how God has always worked in miraculous ways in our lives. Perhaps we even take time to ask God why things are so difficult. It may not change anything, but at least in the act of turning to God in our frustrations, we will be reminded that God still walks with us, God still cares for us, and God provides us with just what we need, right when we need it.

And here's what I think we need to take away from this story of grumbling and complaining in the desert. God is amazingly grace-filled and merciful. Even when we test God, God is still gracious to

provide for our needs. God wishes for all people abundant life. And yet, we continue to question God's presence, and to grumble and complain against each other all the time. But what if we did something different with our energies.

God's Word today was the next section of text right after the grumbling and complaining. Exodus 17:8-16. Amalek attacked the children of Israel and Moses instructed Joshua to take some men and go fight them. Joshua did just that and Moses (carrying the staff from God), Aaron and Hur climbed to the top of a nearby hill. As long as Moses held up the staff in his hand, the Israelites had the advantage. Anytime his hands came down, the army of Amalek had the advantage. Seeing that Moses' arms were getting tired, Aaron and Hur improvised. They found a rock for Moses to sit on and Aaron and Hur came on either side of Moses and helped hold his hands in the air. And his hands held steady until the battle was over.

There is a Willow Tree Angel that I have that I hold dear to my heart and it is one that I give away a lot. It's called the Angel of Courage. And every time I give it away, I tell the story of Moses and his support system. His friends, his Community of Faith, if you will. When it became hard for him to keep it together—when life was more than he could bare, he was surrounded by those who held his hands up for him. He was surrounded by those who (literally) lifted him up.

Isn't that what we're supposed to be as the Body of Christ? Aren't we supposed to be those who lift each other up? When one is down and out or feeling lost and abandoned and can no longer hold their arms up, aren't we supposed to be the ones to lift them up again?

You know, the Israelites roaming in the wilderness were feeling abandoned and betrayed. When you look around the world today, who do you see that feels abandoned or betrayed? What if we took all those efforts we spend in questioning God and one another, and instead sought to answer the need of the lost in the same gracious way that God provides for our need?!? By lifting them up. I think most of us have experienced the amazing ways that God opens our eyes and lifts our arms to his presence when we devote ourselves to service in his name. Imagine if we devoted our whole lives to serving Christ in this way! How much easier it would be to ALWAYS trust in God, to never doubt God's presence with us!

Maybe, just maybe, this should be our commitment as followers of Jesus Christ. We should agree not to complain about one another, nor to test God. And instead we should make a commitment to express our love, forgiveness, understanding, and compassion, especially to those in need. We should commit to be those who lift one another up. Rather than spending all our time and energy complaining, let's make a commitment to trust and serve the Lord our God! And then we will SEE that God really is among us!

God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.