

October 11, 2020

Matthew 5: 1-16

Exodus 17: 1-7

Are You There?

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A couple of years ago there was a show on Broadway called “The Band’s Visit.” It had an odd little story that hardly sounds like enough to hang a whole musical on, let alone to crack open a sermon. A ceremonial policeman’s band from Egypt is supposed to play a concert in a town in Israel as part of a sort of cross-cultural exchange – but they get on the wrong bus and end up in the wrong place, in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere on the edge of the Israeli desert, too late in the day to catch another bus to take them to where they’re supposed to be. So they end up having to hang out in a café overnight in this nowhere-place where, through the night, a motley collection of human beings come and go as happens in a café . That’s about the whole story. (Except that, somehow, it’s irresistible.)¹

One of the denizens of the café is a young man who spends pretty much the whole duration of the show waiting by a pay phone in the corner for a call from someone – maybe his girlfriend. That’s about all he does – other than glowering or chasing away anyone else who might want to use the phone. As night settles in to the café, the moment finally comes for this guy to pour out his heart to the phone that doesn’t ring, and he sings–

Here I am, here I am – and the light is dying. Where are you? Where are you?
Will you answer me?

It’s haunting and beautiful as he begins to sing to the unresponsive Plexiglas bubble of the phone booth – and the next lines of the song are the ones that got stuck in my imagination –

All alone in the quiet – ah, my ears are thirsty
For your voice, for your voice.
Can you answer me?

And there’s something so familiar, so human about the way those words land among all the different people in the nighttime cafe that within another few lines every one of them is singing the words, each in their own way –

Very soon, very soon, that’s the sound of longing
Are you there? Are you there? Will you answer me?

¹ The Band’s Visit - music and lyrics by David Yazbek, book by Itmar Moses, based on the 2007 Israeli film of the same name - opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in November of 2017, and won 10 Tony Awards, including Best Musical. In the original cast the song “Answer Me” was sung by Adam Kantor in the role of “Telephone Guy”.

And that's the last song in the show: everybody singing out that longing, that sense of missed connections, the unrequited need in that question that has such heft to it: *Are you there??*

It was the wistful reference to ears being thirsty, I think, that wrote itself into my "software" when I first heard it – and I guess it's been waiting there until it was time to think about this sermon, and I came across this story in the book of Exodus, chapter 17:

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?"

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" Then Moses cried out to the LORD, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." The LORD answered Moses, "Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink."

So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

That last line in the story stops me in my tracks: "Is the Lord among us or not?" Are you there, are you there? Ah, our ears are thirsty.

Thirst makes a good metaphor. It's as plausible to think of ears being thirsty for a particular longed-for sound as it is, maybe, for Jesus to look out over the people who gathered on the hillside when he cracked open his first sermon and begin by offering a blessing to those "who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt. 5:6) – or for us to look out over the public square in our country these days and say that our consciences are thirsty for integrity – or for me to look out over this mostly-empty sanctuary and say that that my arms are thirsty to really pass the peace with all of you who are out there, somewhere. There are a lot of different kinds of thirst.

Two of them are on display in this story from Exodus 17. There is, of course, thirst that withers the bodies of those bewildered people in the parched desert, when body chemistry begins to go haywire and the mind begins to lose its balance because it can think of little else but the sweet, cooling liquid relief that is nowhere to be found. Fear follows soon after – and fear is the bridge to that other kind of thirst that gnaws on these people in the wilderness: fear dressed as anger, fear that grows into desperation for some sign of providence, some inkling of the engagement of God. During the Offertory we'll hear how the Psalmist cries out, "My soul is a thirst for God, yea, even for the living God. When shall I come to appear before the presence of God?" (Ps. 42:2) Or, in the fearful desperation of the Exodus wilderness, perhaps it's more a case of asking when shall God come to appear before me? *Is the Lord among us, or not? Are you there??*

When you think about it, it's remarkable that the people Israel chose to enshrine in their Sacred literature, not only the memory of the physical trauma of their desperate thirst, but also the trauma of their spiritual dehydration. This story ends, not with the sound of running water and the splashing of satisfaction, but with that anguished question that's left hanging: *Is the Lord among us, or not?* They remembered the question, even recorded it for posterity – so probably we owe it to ourselves to ponder the things they learned from asking it – things they were going to need to know, eventually, when they finally settled down into the place of promise – things they had to learn while they were getting there.

For one thing – they gave their memory a name. Like so many of the episodes in Exodus, the names of the places where things happened became part of the story, passed on from grandparents to great-grandchildren probably even long after no one could quite find the exact locations any more. “They camped at a place called Rephidim,” the story begins; “but there was no water for the people to drink.” And then afterwards – after that astonishing moment at the rock – Moses “called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord.” Not even just one name, but two. Massah means “test”; and the name “Meribah” ups the ante a bit, because it means “quarreled” but not only in the sense of a disagreement, but in the sense of a prosecuted argument – a trial, almost. *That place*, grandparents told their children down the generations – *that place* is where our people remember that we put God to the test, saying, *Is the Lord among us, or not?* In the midst of the withering trials of our lives – the illness, the structural injustice, the broken relationships, the disappointments and, these days, the despair as we contemplate the “house divided” of our nation – our spiritual chemistry out of balance, our souls athirst as we stagger with fatigue – we put God to the test. Isn’t that what we were promised: that God would make the trauma go away, that God would make water appear out of rock, that God would make us free and bring us safely home? Is God indeed among us? The trial turns on the question: is there, indeed, enough evidence in our history to convict God of active, compassionate engagement in the world? And it’s a trial, I think, in which so many of us have been called as witnesses down the generations.

I’m told that there are places in the Sinai wilderness where the porous limestone is indeed honeycombed with channels that connect to underground springs – and that mineral deposits can accumulate over time to clog those passages – and that these deposits might perhaps be dislodged by a sharp blow at just the right spot from some kind of hand-held object... But there’s something else going on here that’s way deeper than an aquifer that makes the Place of the Test more memorable, and more life-giving, even than the inexplicable flow of water.

You might not have noticed, but when God gives Moses instructions about finding the water, here’s what God says: “Go out in front of the people. (Go on ahead of where they are stuck, at that place called Rephidim.) “Take with you some of the elders of Israel” (This is, by the way, the first place in scripture where there’s mention of ‘some of the elders,’ a select few chosen to get out in front and lead the people. One commentator I read thinks that Moses would have taken the very elders who’d been criticizing his leadership most loudly – which would mean that either Moses or that commentator must have been a Presbyterian.) “I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb,” God says. “Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” God was directing Moses and the chosen elders to go on ahead to Horeb (which means waste land), the mountain to which God would be leading the whole company of the Israelites very shortly. You might not realize that you remember what else happened at Mount Horeb – but you do, because it too is a place that has two names: Horeb and its other, more familiar name, Sinai... (Or, at least, you will remember next week when Rev. Mark tells you again the story of the Ten Commandments!) Horeb/Sinai is, not only the place where water somehow flows from within the rock, but the place also where God’s instructions about how to live, how to stay alive together, flow down the mountain – the source of the water that keeps body and soul together, *and* the source of the design for living that keeps humanity and God together – both engraved forevermore on the memory of God’s people.

So, very shortly after the people drank their fill of the waters of Meribah – the place of the Test, where they put God on trial with the question, Are you there? – very soon, very soon after that the time would come for the people to begin drinking their fill of God’s instructions for life together – which, when you think about it, are really God’s way of asking us the same question – cross-examining us, maybe: are *you* there? If the question of Meribah is the question, is there enough evidence to convict God of compassionate, attentive engagement in the world – then it’s also this question: is there enough evidence to convict us of living in God’s way? *Thou shalt have no other gods before me... Thou shalt not kill... Thou shalt not bear false witness... Thou shalt not covet...* Were we paying attention? Do our people still remember? Is there enough evident to convict us of compassionate, attentive engagement in the world? That’s the question we have to carry on the long journey through the wilderness; that’s what we have to learn while getting where we’re going.

When Jesus looked out at the motley collection of human beings gathered with him on another slope – the denizens of a little nowhere-town on the edge of Israel, never far from the wilderness – he saw all kinds of thirst.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, he said to one; to another, blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the humble, the generous, the gentle; blessed are the ones brave enough to stand up for the truth; blessed are the ones who are just trying to live the right way – the ones who thirst for righteousness.

So many different kinds of thirst. So many dangers, toils and snares in this wilderness or that one; so much desperation, and anger, and fear underneath it. So much thirst. At the beginning of his ministry, it didn’t look like a trial, or even a test; that would come later. But the living water that he ladles out – the living water that still flows freely through the inner passages of us when he strikes the rock of our hearts with the staff of his forgiveness and the rod of his guidance – that living water comes from the same wellspring that God’s engaged compassion always comes from in this world.

And the evidence that clinches the trial – the way God passes the “test” we put God to when we dare God to show enough engaged compassion to rescue those who are perishing from their thirsts – the evidence is ... us. The evidence is that we have stood in the flow of both God’s compassion and God’s instruction – that we are there, we have heard what God asks, we have tried to answer, and the water of right living together is flowing among us, or ought to be. We can call the spring by any name we want to – and we can sometimes forget how to find it in the wilderness. But in the end, it is his voice – like the murmur of water softly in the distance – his voice that brings us back, his voice that tests us over and over but only with love – his voice saying over and over, Are you there? Will you answer me? Are you there? For you, my blessed ones, for *your* voices, ah, my ears are thirsty.

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