

3 Lent Yr A, 27/03/2011
Exod 17:1-7
Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson, Chaplain,
The Good Samaritan Society's South Ridge Village,
Medicine Hat, Alberta

“God provides in the wilderness”

In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Linus asks Lucy, “Why are you always so anxious to criticize me?”

Her response was typical of Lucy, “I just think I have a knack for seeing other people’s faults.”

Criticism, whining and complaining—that is what we see and hear in our passage from Exodus today. The Israelites were in the middle of nowhere-land—a hot, dry wilderness. They were getting tired and cranky, and there was no water in sight. What would you do if you were in the Israelites situation? Human beings can survive for quite some time without food. However it’s a different story when it comes to thirst. No water, no life. We cannot survive without water. In the heat and dryness of the Sinai wilderness; it is quite easy to become dehydrated. So no wonder the tired, cranky Israelites start to criticise, whine and complain—you and I would too, if we were in their situation!

Yet, in the first verse of our passage, there is a message that the Israelites seemed to have forgotten and perhaps we too overlook it. The verse tells us: “From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded.” The LORD was with the Israelites in their wilderness journeys, commanding them every step of the way. However, it seems that the Israelites had a short memory. They had forgotten that it was the LORD and his servant Moses who had parted the Red Sea and allowed them to be freed from their Egyptian slavery. On their wilderness journey, the LORD and his servant Moses had turned bitter

water into sweet water (Exod 15:22-27). The LORD had also provided the Israelites with manna and quail to eat as they journeyed in the wilderness (Exod 16:1-36). You would think that the Israelites would have learned by now that the LORD was providing for them in the wilderness—yet, they seem to forget, whine, complain, and criticise. In their forgetfulness, they long to be back in Egyptian slavery—at least there they had something to eat and drink. Life was predictable; they knew where they were, and what they were going to be doing. Here, in this wilderness, there were too many unknowns, and far too much scarcity. Where were they going, what were they doing? They were growing more impatient by the minute.

As today's story unfolds, you can sense the tension and the conflict between Moses and the Israelites. Now the people are blaming Moses by saying: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" Moses is now shaking in his sandals, thinking that his people are going to kill him, he turns to God with this prayer of complaint: "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

I don't know about you, but I can empathise with both the Israelites and Moses in this situation. I don't think that we should be too critical of either the Israelites or Moses here. If we are honest with ourselves, I think we too would whine, complain and criticise like the Israelites. In a lot of conversations recently, many folks have complained to me about the winter weather. In a roundabout way, their complaint is really against God who determines the weather. We may not feel very blessed having to deal with such a cold, snowy winter. Yet, God has his reasons for such weather. As the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us—there is a proper time and place for everything, including the weather that we've had this past winter! In the face of our hardships, we like the Israelites sometimes fail to see and appreciate God's presence, God's provision, and God's blessings. I can also empathise with Moses

here too in this situation. I think many clergy have, at times, felt like Moses. As a pastor and chaplain, I too have faced difficult, trying situations, where I have been criticised and blamed for things and at such times turned to the LORD for help—and, like Moses, complained as he did. In such situations, Moses had to rely more on the LORD to get through such difficulties. The LORD was with Moses and did indeed help him navigate through his trying times. I too have discovered that God's presence, provision and blessings have carried me through my trying times.

Coming back to our story, Moses, feeling like he's at the end of his rope; discovers that God is with him. God tells him to take his staff, which back in Egypt he had used to perform miracles with—so now, God tells him to take the staff and that is likely a reminder to Moses that God is about to work another miracle. God tells him to take the staff and select some of the more calm and clear-thinking elders to go with Moses to the rock at Horeb. God promises Moses that he will be standing in front of him there. Once he arrives at the rock, God tells Moses to strike the rock with his staff. Moses does so, and miraculously water flows from the rock.

The story teaches us that God does provide for Moses and the Israelites. God had provided for them all along as they journeyed in the wilderness, but their memory was short, they kept forgetting. This story is yet another reminder to them of God's provision. The story also teaches us of Moses' obedience to the LORD. He too, like his people, is human and at times complained to God when the Israelites gave him a hard time. Yet, it is important to note who he turned to at such difficult times. He turns to God in prayer and offers up his complaints. The LORD hears his complaints and responds by instructing him in what he is to do next. Moses then listens to the LORD; trusts in him and acts. Moses acts in faith that the LORD will work through him and provide for the Israelites. The LORD always

does. So, we can learn from Moses that in our times of trouble and testing; in our sufferings we too can turn to God in prayer; we can complain to him; he will hear us and provide what we need just as he did for Moses and the Israelites. We may not always appreciate what he provides; we may ask for more or something different than what he gives us; yet, in the grand scheme of things, it is ultimately best for us at the time.

As we journey through this season of Lent, our story of the water from the rock reminds us of Jesus. He, as we sing in the old song is our “Rock of ages.” When Moses struck the rock at Horeb; God provided for the Israelites by giving them the life-giving gift of water to quench their thirst. When Jesus our Rock was struck by suffering a cruel death by crucifixion; God also provided for the human race; for you and me; the life-giving gift of atonement and forgiveness for our sins; and for the promise of abundant life now and through all eternity through Christ our Rock.

In today’s gospel, Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman and offers her and us this wonderful promise: “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” Sometimes, as we journey through this world; we may feel like we’re wandering in a scarce and hostile wilderness. Yet, Christ is with us; he provides for our needs; he gives us the life-giving water of faith through his Word and the sacraments. He journeys with us by giving us the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit’s gifts and fruit. In Christ there is enough life-giving water for you, me, and everyone. Let us drink of this water. The life-giving water that satisfies our thirst now and always. Amen.