

Sermon – September 12, 2021
“Give Us Water to Drink”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Exodus 17:1-7

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill us all anew this morning, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! It is great to have everyone gathered to worship the risen Lord in this place on this beautiful late summer day. Before we begin our look at God's word, let me take just a moment to celebrate the start of another planning cycle where we identify leadership for this church for the coming year. Already many of you have received emails asking you about your desire to serve in the church in the coming year. And I thank those of you who have responded for your inputs and your willingness to serve. I ask that we all spend time in prayer seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the stirring of our hearts to become part of the many groups and committees that lead this church into Jesus' mission in this place and all of the places where the people of God are at work. I also would like to celebrate that the Northumberland school administration has given permission for a Good News Club this fall in the Northumberland Elementary School. Keep that ministry in your prayers and pray for volunteers' hearts to be stirred to come and be a part of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with children.

I would also like to take a moment and remember this day as the anniversary of 9/11. It is difficult to realize it was twenty years ago since the events of that day. We give thanks for the heroes of yesterday and today.

Let me provide some background for this morning's scripture. Israel is now being blessed daily by a loving God with the provision of manna, daily bread from heaven that sustains them in the wilderness. Israel is also still following God's lead through the wilderness of Sin and they have camped at a site in a place called Rephidim. This is not a place that scholars have been able to locate, but we do know from the text that it is a place in the wilderness without water. We should also realize that Israel is following God's leadership. They can disobey God at any time and seek to find their own way to the Promised Land, but so far on this journey they are choosing to follow God's leadership.

This week I tried to imagine what kind of a difficult place Israel was journeying through as they traveled this path of refinement with God. About the closest place I could find in my own life experience was a place called the Nevada Test Site. Some of you may recognize this site as the location in the United States where open air tests were conducted during the development of the atomic bomb. The Nevada Test Site is a drive of several hours north of Las Vegas, a place that may be familiar to some of us. The Nevada Test Site is also the one place in the US where Joshua cactus grow in abundance, and there is little water in that place unless it rains, which is rare. It is a place the US government saw fit to have me spend time on several occasions. On one of those occasions, three of us were working with a sensor determining the range it could detect an event. That caused us to be moving farther and farther away from a test site we used until we tripped some sensors in the desert used to alert security to protestors who might try to hike into the test sight. We were visited by a security guard who after learning why we were there was very chatty and told us that farther down the road we were on, about another mile, was a spring that the Indians and later settlers used for water. After our security guard left, we walked down the road and found a couple of large rocks that formed a lean to cover and underneath there was a pool of cool, clear water. There in the middle of the high desert with no water in sight in any direction was a spring of water. Israel's need for water in the wilderness brought back to me my memory of that experience. It was amazing to me to know that hidden in that vast dry desert there was water. Let's look now at Israel's own search for water in the wilderness.

While God is providing for Israel's food needs, they also will need water and just like in my experience in the desert, the wilderness does not have abundant water resources. Israel will be tested by God to see if they will trust Him to meet their need for water.

If we were to take the time to count the number of occurrences of the word "water" in the Bible, we would find that it occurs 722 times. To trace the use of the word "water" through the pages of God's Word and seek to understand its many uses would be a long challenging study project, and to share what one would learn would also be a very long sermon. But let me trace just a few of the occurrences of water in the Bible for us this morning as I think they will help us understand God's provision of water for Israel. Let's start at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1:1-2 "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." (NRSV) At the beginning of creation, we find water in the midst of the chaos of creation, and out of that chaos, as God creates, comes order and life. Water is present from the beginning of creation. It has an association with life from the very beginning of God's creational actions.

We may recall that Israel passed through the water as they were brought out of Egypt and led into the wilderness. Israel was in a sense recreated from slaves in bondage to Egypt to free people seeking to follow God, and their passing through the divided waters of the sea marks that recreation. They have been given grace by God and are reborn as a people seeking to grow in their knowledge of this loving God. They are now learning who God is through the testing God brings to them. These are not tests with a pass or fail, but are new opportunities for Israel to obey God and learn God's nature as they are prepared to be God's people living in the Promised Land. However, Israel is not yet in the Promised Land. They have not yet fulfilled that part of God's promise. They are still in the wilderness being refined, learning to obey and trust a loving God. The idea of obedience to God is not a movement to a certain level of obedience and then there is no new test of obedience. It is a continuous upward journey that leads to a deepening relationship with an infinite God. There may come a point in Israel's development when their love of God makes the testing easier, but for now they are newborns and are stuck between the promise of a land to come and the fulfillment of that promise. They live in the now and the not yet of this promise from God.

On this part of the journey, God has led Israel to a place where there is no water they can find. The bread from heaven has been rained down on them, but they can find no water and without water they will all perish. Notice the words here are "the people thirst for water." We are told what

they thirst for and it is not justice, righteousness, or the love of God. The people of Israel thirst for water to sustain their lives in the wilderness. They have a need for water and they want this need met. Israel does not yet trust God and they test God by asking, in essence, “Is God present and in control or not?”

Israel is not unique in this struggle to trust God. When we approach God with our terms for belief in God by telling God “if you will do what I want, give me what I think I need, then I will believe in you,” we also are testing God. We are approaching God on our terms and are not letting God be God. Our struggle as sinful humanity is our tendency to bring God down to satisfy our needs, our thirst, our desires, and not to praise God in the midst of our needs, trusting Him to provide in accordance with God’s will. We approach God as Israel does here in the wilderness, testing God by saying, “O God I am thirsty and I need water or I fear I will perish. Give me water or I will not believe in you.” We question if God is real and is in control of our situation. We hold that if our demands are not met in our time on our terms, we will not follow God. Our approach should be to trust God and, even if we die, to give God the glory in all of our situations in life.

Israel’s words to Moses demanding water are so angry that Moses as God’s representative fears he is about to be stoned to death. But even in the face of these angry voices, notice what Moses does. He speaks to God. He prays for those who are so angry they are about to stone him. He does not ask God to protect him or to send down fire to consume those who threaten him and are testing God. He prays for them a prayer of intercession, crying out to God for Israel. We as followers of Christ should take notes here and like Moses lift up those who are against Christians, asking for God to meet their needs out of God’s steadfast love.

Notice that God does not tell Moses how to change the people of Israel to those with grateful trusting hearts, and God does not take action against them for their lack of trust. God tells Moses where to find water. Once again in the middle of the wilderness, in a place that seems short on resources, in a moment when the death of children and livestock is at hand, a loving God chooses to provide for the people of God.

God tells Moses to go forward with the staff in his hand with which he struck the Nile to the rock at Hebron and to take elders as witnesses with him. Remember the first plague in Egypt where God had Moses strike the Nile in Pharaoh’s presence and the water of the Nile could not be used to satisfy thirst because of God’s action? Here in the presence of God, who is standing on the rock, Moses will strike the rock and water will come forth in abundance and flow back down the dry

creek bed as a river of water to the camp where Israel waits. Here in the wilderness where there is no water, God again provides for Israel through God's control of creation. God is in control of the wilderness and brings forth life-giving and sustaining water in a place of apparent lack of water, God brings life-giving, life-sustaining water. God's command of creation that took away Egypt's water supply now brings forth water from the rock for God's people.

Let's move our look at water forward in time to a well in Samaria where Jesus sits waiting for a woman. At that well, Jesus will offer her living water and she will ask Jesus to give her this water that she may never thirst again. There at a well, Jesus tells the woman he is the Christ who will give all who believe in him living water. And there this woman believes in Jesus and then goes to tell others about Jesus and brings them to the source of living water that they also might believe and never thirst again.

We now jump forward just a few months and find Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. For seven days of the feast, the priests have gone to the pool of Siloam and brought back water to be poured out as a sacrifice to God. And on the last day of the festival, the great day, Jesus stands up and cries out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" John tells the readers of his Gospel that this living water is the Holy Spirit that is given at Pentecost, and we today hold that it is given to us as we come up out of the water of our baptism.

And then we move forward a few more months and we arrive at a hilltop outside of Jerusalem where there are three crosses and on the middle cross hangs Jesus' lifeless body. A soldier takes his spear and pierces Jesus' side and out comes blood and water. Jesus, the source of living water, pays the price that we might all receive forgiveness for our sins, be washed clean and reconciled to God for eternity, so that we may thirst for God no more.

And then let us make one last jump in time to some point in the future to a time that only God knows. In Revelation 22, at the beginning of the last chapter in God's word for God's people, we find these words, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city." We again find the water of life coming from God and the Lamb, flowing out to give life to God's people.

Now we have flown through the Word of God looking at this thread of water that gives life. And along the way, I hope we caught that we are given the Holy Spirit in our baptism as we come

up out of the water. We, as believers in Jesus, have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us; living water dwells in each of us. We are not repositories meant to hold living water, but children of God meant to be those who are to be as Jesus tells us in John 7:38. We are to be believers with hearts out of which “shall flow rivers of living water.” This gift of the Spirit we have been given is to be flowing out of us into the lives of others. We are to be sources of life-giving water that brings thirsty people transforming, living water. A believers’ life is not life in a wilderness sustained for a day by water, but eternal life reconciled to God through the Holy Spirit, living water, in Jesus Christ. This is who we are as Christians. We are sources of rivers of living water to those who are thirsting for real water and cannot find it in the wilderness. We are to be sources of living water even to those who are angry with God because they have a thirst that they cannot satisfy with the things they find in their wilderness journey. Our mission is to help another person find living water. Just as the water from the rock flowed back to the people of Israel in the wilderness, we are each to be a source of living water to people in this place, people who are perishing in the wilderness that is the world. We are to be letting God’s love flow through us into the lives of other people. We, like the Israelites in the wilderness, are living in the time between the promise of a crystal river flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb and its arrival. We are those who are seeking to follow Jesus into the wilderness and bring new life to all whom we meet. We know where the living water is; it is in us. We are those who are to be praying for the lost, seeking to meet them, sharing our source of living water with them, and helping them to become a new source of living water. We need to be prepared, ready, and willing to change our interaction with the world from being separated from the world to those in the world pouring out the water we have been given. As we pour out the water in us, we are refilled with a gushing spring that flows up to eternal life. Are we ready to be a source of living water to a person God puts in our life this day? People get ready. Let the water flow out of our hearts into those who are perishing from a thirst for living water.

Pray with me: Jesus, we received the Holy Spirit when we came through the waters of our baptism. Lord, come and do a work in us that we might see the lost around us with your eyes, go to them, and love them with the love you have given us. Lord, forgive us for holding onto the living water you have filled us with, and instead open us to be channels of God’s love going forth to quench the thirst of the lost. Lord, let the water flow forth from your peoples’ hearts. Amen.