

Is the Lord Among Us or Not?

By Dr. Dave Neale

This is a story about a newly liberated slave population dying of thirst in the Sinai desert. An overwhelmed leader who is at wit's end about what to do. Not a bad opening for any narrative!

All liberation movements in history are painful, messy business even in their most laudable forms. And then, once in train, the powers of tyranny never cease to pursue liberty.

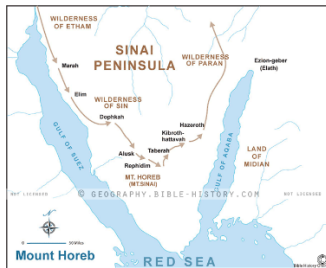
And, of course, one person's revolution is another person's rebellion. Think the French Revolution, for example, of how a liberation movement can begin nobly and end in an even worse tyranny.

So the visceral desperation of this story is familiar to history.

They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

Let's look at the setting and get ourselves oriented to reread the text for our lives today.

I have two pictures for you. The first is a map of the southern end of the Sinai peninsula where this event is thought this is to have occurred. There is no ruin associated with Rephidim. Maybe it was a dried-up oasis. It is thought it would be within a few days of Mt. Sinai, also known as Jebel Musa (Mountain of Moses) and referred to in the Bible simply as Horeb.



Which you see here.



This is an area of the peninsula, even today, that is utterly remote and hard to get to. One 19th century explorer describes the mountain this way: "...invisible from every quarter, almost concealed and buried, neither distinguished by height, form, position, nor any other peculiarity..."¹

That is an interesting place for the Mountain of God, who hides epiphany in a deeply obscure desert.

Four significant things happened at Horeb:

- Moses encounters the burning bush here while tending Jethro's sheep (Ex 3:1);

- Today's incident of water from the rock (17:1);
- the appearance of God on the mountain (Ex 19);
- and the imposition of the law (Ex 20).

They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

In an article entitled *What is it like to die of thirst?* I found this: "Thirst, as you probably know, is one of the most potent drives for behavior we have... even more than hunger" ²

Did you know the body loses 2-4 quarts of water per day through normal bodily processes. If not replaced, the volume of blood will decline, leading to organ failure, beginning with the kidney, which is responsible for removing toxins from the body.

The first place the body goes for liquid when there isn't enough water in the system is to the cells. The water withdrawn for the cells is then moved to the blood stream by the living miracle that is our bodies.

That is why the best thing you can do to keep your brain clear is drink water to keep the brain cells hydrated. So as I was preparing this message I jumped up and got a big glass of water.

You can die in 3 days from dehydration; but you most certainly won't live longer than 6 days.

This was a situation of desperate crisis.

They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

Let's look at the characters and what we know about them:

- God is a remote figure to the narrative.
 - God comes across, not as uncompassionate, but sort of as unfeeling, detached, emotionless. It's almost like He is distracted by other matters.
 - He seems not at all parental; not at all inclined to tenderness.
 - This God imposes Law, he engages in brinkmanship of dying of thirst with this people.
- Moses seems overwhelmed, afraid for his personal safety. Frustrated with the situation and his unruly caravan.

But I think it is with *the people* that we will find our most interesting lessons for life today. They stand *between* the water walls of the Red Sea and the Mountain of God.

It is these people we most resemble. If we are going to learn anything about human nature and what it means to walk with God, this is where we are going to learn it. Because, to be honest... I'm kind of with the people in this story.

...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?" (Ex 17:2-3)

"You couldn't kill us in the comfort of our own homes?! You had to bring us out here to kill us with thirst?!" Mocking, sneering, cynical, and just edging toward that sardonic Jewish sense of humour we all enjoy.

“What are we doing out here??!!”

Were not their male babies saved from the angel of death by the blood on their lintels? Did not the plague of locusts and rivers turned to blood conquer their captors, did not the staff that became a snake before Pharaoh liberate them from slavery? Did not the water stand up with walls?

He called the place Massah [test] and Meribah [quarrel], because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” (Ex 17:7)

From the Text

As how we might apply this to our lives today, I have what are just observations really. Hopefully this does a bit of justice to this multi-faceted, complex history.

The first observation has to do with our worship of God.

They stand between the crossing of the Red Sea and the Mountain of God, experiencing the mundane reality of dying of thirst in an empty desert. That great in-between where we are “living the life we actually have,” as Kate Bowler says!

Do you recall that while still in captivity in Egypt God send Moses to Pharaoh with this message: ***‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, “Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.” (Ex 7:16)***

Whoever thought that their liberation and then subsequent worship in the desert would include this experience of dying by thirst?

The purpose of “worship” is to gather corporately to express adoration, praise and thanksgiving to God for his grace and glory.³ Instead we get, ***Is the Lord with us or not?***

The first observation is that our worship is an imperative of living out our redemption, *irrespective of our situation.*

We may feel we are dying of thirst in a desert land, but we turn our hearts to God in praise and thanksgiving, because we know God’s got this. Because what else are we going to do. Quarrel and test the Lord? It’s not that our faith is strong to save us, it is that God is strong to save us in faith, come what may.

Second observation is this: We also see that the people fail God miserably in respect to their faith. They quarrel with Moses, they test God. But... in spite of the failure of faith among the peoples, in spite of the fact that the parting Red Sea wasn’t all that long ago, God does not count their failure against them.

This seems to me to be one of the more arresting truths we find here. We call this the graciousness of the Lord God. This is where we see the gospel of this passage.

Who among us has not “quarreled with and tested” God (Ex 17:7)? And yet, in the next three chapters we have the Great Epiphany of Horeb, the imposition of the Law and the Covenant invoked.

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. (Ex 19:5-6)

This is the promise to a people who have, at times, failed in their faith.

Third observation is this. One way to look at the experience of the water pouring from the Rock of Horeb is that we see a movement from miracle to imposition of the law.

So, the people must, the LORD knows, move to acting out their redemption by their obedience to the Law.

Miracles are great. But the people don't dwell in miracle. Miracles occur in the Bible in "zones," miracles attest to significant junctures in the story of faith. They aren't the bread of normal life.

I take this to be the same obligation we have in our Christian experience. James said, ***Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate a person really has it?...Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove...***

And then quoting Gen 15:6 (Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness) ... ***was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ... Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?*** (James 2:14-24, *The Message*)

So we see here that as Law follows upon the deliverance through miracle, so also is the way of our Christian journey. Our Christian journey is lived out in the mundane world and we show our worship by what we do.

I live at the parsonage and watch the activity at the church as we move through the week. I see the groups that use the church. I see our own meetings, I see civic groups, a school, area pastors meeting for prayer. All part of our ministry to the community.

But what I see that amazes me is a parishioner pulling weeds to keep our gardens beautiful (Thanks Leif! And others!). I see our people volunteering endlessly to put feet to their faith. They come to practice worship. This doesn't just happen off-the-cuff. None of the good we accomplish as a community of faith happens without the contributions of innumerable folks working together for the good – here in the land of the mundane.

I close with this (musicians come): What shall we do here between the Red Sea and Mount Sinai? I can't think of any better way to worship God than to send shipping containers to Ukraine that can be turned into medical clinics. To do works of kindness to refugee families without any strings attached – pure compassion. Sharing the joys and griefs with all who come into contact with our community so that the mundane can exude the graciousness of God to as many as possible.

The words of our closing song this morning are meaningful:

Standing on this mountaintop, Looking just how far we have come, Knowing that for every step You were with us.

Scars and struggles on the way, But with joy our hearts can say, Yes our hearts can say,

Never once did we walk alone, Never once did You leave us on our own, You are faithful
God, You are faithful

Benediction: And now may this ever so patient God rescue you from your thirst at just the right moment in the week to come. And may he have our deepest loyalty and gratitude in return. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

¹ John Rogerson quoting the German 19th century Egyptologist Lepsius who visited the site in 1845, *Atlas of the Bible*, p. 126.

² Lenny Berstein, Washington Post 2014.

³ *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 605.