

“Help for the Journey”
Exodus 17:1–7
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As some of you know, Dana and I took a major road trip this summer, along with our two German Shepherds. In this time of isolation and restriction, it was good to get out of town, but we drove roughly 2,100 miles. First, we moved Ali to Ann Arbor, with me driving the truck full of furniture and Dana driving the car. Then, we drove from Ann Arbor to Memphis to see Ian and Brittany. And finally, we drove from Memphis back to Raleigh.

2,100 miles, and not only that, there were major delays on every leg of the trip and COVID-related challenges at almost every stop. It was worth it, of course, but 2,100 miles in a car... Road trips are tough, Tusker and Rika can tell you.

So can Moses. He is leading a journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. The terrain is challenging enough, but every step of the way the people complain about something. Far worse than children asking repeatedly, “Are we there yet?” or saying, “I have to go the bathroom,” (there are advantages to traveling with German Shepherds) the Israelites complain constantly about what they are missing. In last week’s reading from Exodus, it was food. In today’s reading, it is water. And these two stories of unrest are neither the beginning nor the end of the complaint.

Yet, before we become too critical of them, there are several things we might want to consider. First, in today’s story, we don’t really know whether they are a little thirsty at the end of the day or so dehydrated that they might well die. A lack of water in the desert is no trivial concern. It is a matter of life and death. God has helped them thus far, but it won’t matter unless they find water soon, if the latter is the case.

Second, as Old Testament professor Michael Chan points out, these people are on a journey not just from Egypt to Palestine, but from years of enslavement to absolute freedom. Such a journey is not easy nor is it completed in a short time. It takes generations — not to

mention a great deal of work and patience — to unlearn habits of domination and learn habits of responsibility. The central calling is to develop trust in the God who has brought them this far, but such trust will not be developed overnight, given the nature of their experience. Perhaps this is why God does not chastise them for their lack of faith, but simply provides for their need, bringing forth water from a rock.

But the most obvious reason we might not want to be too critical of these folks is that we are just like them. We have been blessed by God in more ways than we can count, but when we find ourselves in a situation of great need for which we cannot envision a solution, we break out into cries of not just despair but also complaint. And like the Israelites, what we receive from God, again and again, is not judgment but grace, not justice but mercy, love in the form of what we need most.

All of this seems particularly helpful right now because we are on a difficult journey, a tough road trip. It begins with COVID-19 — the health risks, the economic challenges, the social isolation, the complete upheaval of life. We have been blessed beyond measure before with God's grace and the benefits of modern medicine, but these realities simply make our current situation more difficult. We're not accustomed to having life derailed without our being able to get it back on the rails quickly. We're tempted to complain to whomever we can find, including God, and there is plenty of blame to go around!

But our journey also includes the divisiveness of this time on many issues, particularly those related to race which have flared up yet again this week. We thought we had some of this resolved, I'm not sure why, but we did. We thought partisan differences could be transcended and ideological diversity could be a strength, but now we're not so sure. The pendulum swings back and forth, things have always worked out in the past, but this does not guarantee anything for the future.

And then, there are the specific challenges we face at FBC Raleigh right now. We know we are travelling on a big, sturdy ship sustained by God's grace for 208 years. A few waves here and there will not turn us over or cause us to sink. But when the camera of salvation history zooms in on this specific time, it is easy to see that we face our share of

challenges not just because of all that the Church universal is facing, but because of the many transitions we are navigating at one time, particularly in our ministerial staff. And it is a challenge not just for us, but also for Mary Alice, Trey and Michael.

In such a time as this, with all of these challenges on the road and more, we can identify with the Israelites in their complaint. In fact, it is nice to have their companionship right now. Misery not only loves company; misery loves equally miserable company! We feel how we feel. It is only human to complain. And perhaps we can find encouragement in the fact that God does not immediately zap the Israelites for their lack of faith.

There must be times when God feels like the owner of a diner in Richmond, Virginia, who had a sign behind the cash register that read, “Thank you for not whining!” But God understands our suffering and pain, and thus is willing to listen to us with compassion when we express frustration with life. We have reason to be frustrated now, reason to whine and complain, and it is okay to do so.

And yet, this is not the only help this text provides — companions in the courtroom of complaint. The text also points us in the direction of a goal, an aspiration, which lies at the very center of life and faith. The goal is trust, a basic confidence in the goodness of God to provide what we need. Like the Israelites, we will never develop perfect trust. It will always be a work in progress. But as God cares for us time after time, we grow in our trust, which is what faith is.

Many people today equate faith with intellectual assent, believing certain things about God and Jesus, and there is content to our faith. But as Robin Meyers points out in his book *Saving God from Religion: A Minister's Search for Faith in a Skeptical Age*, the church flourished for several centuries before any creeds were written. Faith was about following Jesus, trusting in him and in his way of life.

Marcus Borg once noted that the Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*, means trust. “[It’s] the sound that a baby donkey makes when it is calling for its mother. To appreciate that, you have to say *emunah* so that it sounds like that... like a soft braying... there’s something kind of powerful about that ... an element of confidence that the cry will be

heard (Marcus Borg, *Days of Awe and Wonder: How to Be a Christian in the 21st Century*, pp. 21-22).” Indeed, there is, and this is what trust is, what faith is — crying out with confidence that God will hear.

We might think the Israelites should have an unshakeable faith by now. God has delivered them from bondage and guided them through the wilderness. God has given them food when they have cried out in hunger. Surely they realize by now that if God is leading them, God will take care of their needs. And yet, they still seem to struggle. They cry out, but not in confidence. Yet do we do better? Have we not been blessed before? Yet do we not still struggle to place our trust in God?

Part of the challenge is that God never seems to relate to people directly. A human intermediary — Moses here — always seems to be involved. And it is with Moses that the people quarrel. He immediately claims that their complaint is with God, he speaks for God, but how do we react to people who equate their word with God’s? It is one thing to trust the Creator of the whole world. It is quite another thing to trust a flesh and blood human being who claims to speak for this Creator.

But another part of the challenge is that we struggle to give up control or at least the illusion of control. Placing trust in someone else, even the big Someone Else, means we are depending completely on them. Yet there are things we cannot do for ourselves, and we place our trust in others all the time, whether we realize it or not.

We trust the maker of the car we drive, the mechanic who works on it, the other drivers on the road — though perhaps not all of the latter. We trust the maker of the plane and the pilot and the mechanic — we place our lives in their hands when we fly. We trust the people in our families; in our church; in our places of work, study and play — at least to some extent. We have to, life depends on trust.

And we trust God because God has cared for us in the past, and because we have no other choice, other than not to trust at all. God is the great safety net underneath us, whether we fly on the high wire or remain on the ground with the elephants and clowns. In the words of an old translation of Deuteronomy 33:27, underneath us throughout life are the everlasting arms. It is ever a work in progress. We have moments of doubt just like the Israelites. But bit by bit, we grow in our trust.

And yet, this is not the last word of help we have from the text either, this is not where the story ends, with the people struggling to trust in God. In fact, the story doesn't end with the people doing anything at all. It ends with God taking action, providing water from a rock.

God does this not when the people demonstrate the appropriate level of trust but in spite of the fact that they do not demonstrate such trust. That is, God extends grace to the people and not only this one time. Contrary to popular Christian opinion, the God of the Hebrew Bible is a God of grace just like the God of the Christian Testament. And as God extends grace, God uses Moses in the process, thus confirming his role as a leader and spokesperson for the Almighty.

So, we are called to grow in our trust. It's okay to express frustration, but we are called to grow in our trust, to believe deep in our hearts in the goodness of God, no matter what challenges we face — like COVID-19, the divisiveness of our time, the changes we face as a church. But even when our trust seems inadequate, even when we have questions and doubts, God is still at work for good.

That's not just the message of this ancient story from Exodus; it's the message of the Gospel. While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly, the Apostle Paul says, writing to the church at Rome (Romans 5:6). What we do matters, as Jesus points out in today's Gospel reading, but it's not all about us. It's also about God, and God always extends grace in one form or another. God provides what we need in the dry places of life — perhaps not exactly when or how we want — but God provides what we need.

Theologian Karl Barth was asked to summarize his sophisticated theology in one sentence. It must have seemed like a ridiculous request to everyone who overheard it. But Barth answered the question, saying, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That's all we need to know. That's all that needs to be said. The God we know in Christ loves us, no matter what. Our experience, like that of the ancient Israelites, is ever a mixture of faith and doubt, gratitude and complaint, trust and betrayal. But God's love remains the same. God has the first word and the last, and that word is grace... thanks be to God!