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Exodus 17:1-7

Reformation in our Christian Church

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Exodus 17:1-7 New Revised Standard Version

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; 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?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

“Is the Lord among us or not?” There is this group of people who walk in the heat of the day carrying everything they own with them, carrying their children, carrying their tent, and trying to manage the livestock as they walk. They are thirsty and they are scared. They have been told that God is with them and leads them in the wilderness but if God is with them, why isn’t there any water? They need water to live.

I would have been right with the Israelites complaining and angry. They were slaves in Egypt, but at least they had water to drink in Egypt. Moses challenged Pharaoh and got him to let God’s people go. So Moses led them out of slavery and across the Red Sea. He then led them across the desert, about two hundred and fifty miles, until they reached the point in our story today, about twenty-five miles from Mt. Sinai.

They’d been on the road for a long time, probably several months. They were tired. They were frustrated. They were starting to have doubts, not just about their present situation, but about their future. They were no longer trusting that through Moses, God really was going to lead them to a new place, a better place. They were tired and frustrated, and they were hungry and thirsty. They couldn’t remember why they had followed Moses in the first place. He didn’t know where he was going! God had promised them a land flowing with milk and honey, and they were in a dry, desert land with no food and no water.

“Is the Lord among us or not?” Have you ever been angry, frustrated, tired, hungry, thirst, and upset? When I am in that state, I often look for someone to blame, and I never blame myself, I find a scapegoat! That’s what the Israelites do. “Why did you lead us out here? We’ll die out here! We’re thirsty. We’re tired. It’s dry. It’s hot. My feet hurt.” So, Moses, who was doing the best that he could, who only wanted to help, he found himself under attack by the very people he risked his life to help. It’s easy for us to point fingers of blame at scapegoats. We tend to blame everyone but ourselves.

“Is the Lord among us or not?” Let me tell you a story. Five hundred years ago the Christian Church had already divided in the east and in the west. In the west the Roman Catholic Church was the only church. On a cold, crisp, late October day in 1517, there was a concerned 33-year-old monk and professor who wanted to talk about the church. He posted a list of ideas for how the church could be better on the town bulletin board, which also happened to be the wooden door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He had 95 points he wanted to discuss, and he had no idea that a Reformation would result from his act. Martin Luther was frustrated with the pope, with the church’s views on purgatory, and that the church said you had to purchase forgiveness of sins. The Catholic Church was trying to build St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, and it was expensive! If you would pony up some money, then the church would say you were forgiven, and if you didn’t have any money, well, that was unfortunate for you. Martin Luther said salvation wasn’t by your works but by grace alone through faith alone.

Martin Luther found no peace with God after he did what the Church said to do. The Church told him how to avoid sin. The Church told him how to repent and how to make amends. He did all of those things and he didn’t feel any better. He didn’t have peace. He felt trapped. He was in this cycle of self-loathing and he realized he was never going to be able to achieve a good standing with God by following the rules of the Church. He watched as the Church he loved told people they had to pay money and more money and more money to receive salvation. Martin Luther hoped that if he opened his heart and shared his frustration with the Church, that there would be debate and that it would produce reform.

It produced reform, but not in the way that he thought. Reform would come in the form of the Protestant Reformation. I heard writer Glennon Doyle this week and she said that with each death, there is a new beginning, a new creation, a rising. We know this. We know on Good Friday that Easter is coming. But on Saturday there is uncertainty, there is mess, there is heartbreak and pain and struggle. For Moses and the Israelites, this was their Saturday moment. They had left slavery in Egypt, resurrection was in the Promised Land, and they are in the struggle. They are in the pain and the heartbreak.

Martin Luther’s Saturday meant the church he loved brought charges against him and they demanded he recant his complaints. He said at the Diet of Worms, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason – for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves – I considered myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one’s conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen.” Martin Luther’s Saturday meant that he went into hiding and had time to translate the Bible into German so people could read it in their own language. When people could read the Scriptures, they could experience the same life-transforming power it gave Luther.

Martin Luther doesn’t share any of his ideas for how to fund the building of St. Peter’s Basilica. Luther wanted a debate about the abuses and errors of the church. He wasn’t looking for a revolution. Moses doesn’t have any ideas for how to fix the water problem for the Israelites. Moses cannot produce drinking water. I appreciate Moses’ response when the people are upset. He doesn’t know how to fix their problem, so he blames the people! He tells them that they are testing God. My husband Lee likes to say, “I didn’t do it. You don't have proof I did it. I think you did it.” Deny, demand proof, and accuse the other person!

“Is the Lord among us or not?” The Church is a gift of God’s transforming grace but it is human and broken. Today is World Communion Sunday, a day for us to to imagine people of all countries coming to the same table of grace and love. Did you know that zip code 75038 in Irving is the most ethnically diverse in the United States? May we all know what Martin Luther knew, “By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.” That affirmation was worked out by Lutheran and Roman Catholic representatives over several long years, and signed officially on behalf of their churches in 1999, with Methodist and other Christian bodies endorsing it in the years following.[[1]](#footnote-2)

This small meal we are about to share symbolizes in a different way the new relationship with God and one another into which we have been brought. We are called to be one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. God’s grace, love, and acceptance is reaching out to us today to call us to hope-filled and purposeful lives of service to our neighbor. “Is the Lord among us or not?” God is here in this place, with each one of us. How will we respond to God’s amazing grace and live into the future God has prepared for us? It begins at the table of grace, at the table of peace, at the table of love, and the table of joy. We do not have to stay at the Saturday place of uncertainty and struggle. We can come through the struggle and rejoice in the glory of God. Let us come to God’s table. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. From Rev. Dr. Charles Wood’s sermon at Greenland Hills on August 6, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)