

FEAR AND TREMBLING
Exodus 17: 1-7

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University Church of Chicago
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George Muller ran an orphanage in Bristol, England for forty years, and he said that he never once asked anyone for money. Every time he needed money or clothes or food for the children, he would pray, and his prayers would be answered.

The best definition of faith has little or nothing to do with belief but everything in the world to do with trust. Without trust in God, without trust in God's purpose, life becomes nothing more than just a series of random events. It just becomes, as Jean Paul Sartre characterized it, "one damn thing after another."

That's why the most exciting and informative stories in the Bible center around trust, faith acted out. Such a story is the third in our Old Testament lections for the season of Pentecost. Exodus 17 finds the people of Israel on the way during their forty-year trek through the wilderness. They are between the great Exodus from Egypt, when Moses had led them through the Sea of Reeds, an experience in which thousands of their pursuing enemies, the Egyptians, had drowned and their later entrance into the Promised Land, the home country given to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, to which the Israelites longed to return.

Just prior to the incident recorded in today's First Lesson, the Israelites have been miraculously fed by God, who has given them manna and quails to eat. When the people had complained about nearly starving to death and yearned to be back in Egypt, where they at least had enough food, God sent them quail.

That story offers yet another reason to believe that God is a Southerner. Because only a God from the South would offer quail, the most delicious of all created birds, to eat. A Yankee divinity would have offered the people turkey or doves or pigeons. God is both a Southerner and gracious, because quail, that tiny little bird just overbrimming with delicious white meat, is one ultimate symbol of God's providential care.

But now we find them again, the Israelites in another place. What transpires in this story is an all-too-familiar pattern through the period of their wandering in the wilderness.

First, the people find themselves in need. In this case they are thirsty. Then, they complain, they murmur "against Moses"—which is really a complaint against God, because Moses is their God-chosen leader. Moreover, their complaint becomes a standardized accusation: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt? To kill us?" (Exodus 17:3).

Second, Moses prays. Often in such situations he intercedes between the people and God. But in this instance he's had enough. Moses complains, too. "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me" (verse 4). Moses has a dual complaint: against the unfaithful,

unbelieving people on the one hand and against God, who has put him in this untenable leadership position, on the other.

Third, God gives instructions for actions that lead to meeting the people's needs through miraculous means. Thus, God tells Moses to go with some elders as witnesses, to take his staff and strike the rock on which the Lord stands (verses 5-6). When he does what God has told him to do, water springs from the rock.

The conclusion of the story gives an account of the place named Massah and Meribah. And here's what is remarkable about the naming of the place: the names do not memorialize the miracle of the water but the contentiousness and lack of faith of the Israelites. "Meribah" means quarrel or argument, and "Massah" means trial, test, proof.

Soren Kierkegaard was one of the most remarkable people God ever created—a polemicist, philosopher, diarist, lover of common people, a bon vivant around 19th century Copenhagen who paradoxically had only one true friend in his entire forty-three years of life, and undoubtedly one of the most insightful Christian writers of all time.

Kierkegaard was forever maimed by the life and death of his father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard. Soren Abaye was the youngest of Michael Pedersen's seven children, and the only one who learned his father's terrible secret. When Michael was a young man, he had suffered (not enjoyed) an encounter with a prostitute, and he lived from that time on in fear that he would not only contract syphilis but, because the symptoms of the disease lay dormant in the contracted person's body for months, even years, he would not know whether or not he had the disease. Moreover, it could be imparted to his children.

So, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, trying to atone for his sins, trying to understand God's possible punishment for them, stood one day on the heaths of the Jutland, that almost-barren grassland north and east of Copenhagen, and cursed God.

Every person in this sanctuary knows deep down in his or her heart the anguish of that young man. His story is the story of the Israelites and it is your story and mine. We complain, we murmur against God. We are unsure of the difference between punishment and mercy, between providence and grace. And we, like the Israelites rebel against God.

Justice means I get what I deserve. Mercy means I don't get what I deserve. Grace means I don't deserve what I get.

Having been rescued from slavery and either on their way to or from Mount Sinai, where God made covenant with them, the people use every occasion to find fault with God or even to worship other gods. For these reasons, they thought they were not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

No, that wasn't the case at all. The truth was that they kept themselves from entering the Promised Land. Because no person, no land, no experience can contain promise unless we are

able to believe it, unless we trust.

Do you remember that old story about a husband and wife who die at the same time and go to heaven? Since St. Peter knows how much they love golf, he introduces them to the best course in heaven. They take their clubs and start playing. When they get to the fifth tee, the husband looks down the beautiful fairway, surrounded by the most beautiful oak trees he has ever seen, carpeted with the greenest imaginable grass, approaching a pond of blue, bright water. He leans on his club, surveys the beauty and says to his wife, “You know, I could have been here five years ago if it had not been for all that oat bran you made me eat.”

Similarly, the Israelites in this account of the water springing from the rock cannot see God at work—even in the miracles that constantly surround them. God patiently answers their prayers and gives them what they need, but they constantly complain and whine and argue.

The story in Exodus 17 is a parable of the modern church. We wonder why the church doesn’t attract newcomers, why it doesn’t grow, why people visit once or twice never to return. Well, look at the church through the eyes of a visitor. More incisively than that, feel the way a visitor feels. She may not be able to articulate the mood she senses, she may not be certain about what’s going on in the typical congregation she wanders into while shopping for meaning and fellowship, but she can sense the arguing that goes on among members, the animosities that have been harbored for years, the lack of forgiveness and the disputes with the pastor, the indifference of so many of the leaders and the hidebound attitudes of the people who sit in the same pews every week with the same frowns on their faces.

But there’s another, more hopeful theme of the wilderness story: God’s gracious care for the wanderers in the desert. The promise first given to Sarah and Abraham will be fulfilled, the people will be sustained so that their descendants can become a great nation and receive the land.

The people may doubt but God will provide.

I have grown to disagree more and more with my friend, Kirbyjon Caldwell, the pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas. It is the largest Methodist congregation in the United States in terms of worship attendance (which is the most accurate way to judge the strength of a congregation, because we keep indifferent, uncommitted members on the rolls for years). Windsor Village has a budget over five million dollars and has revitalized an entire area of America’s fourth largest city as well as Houston’s crumbling central city. And—pay attention!—they have NEVER HAD A STEWARDSHIP CAMPAIGN. Kirbyjon says he doesn’t know how to run one. They simply trust God and the gratitude of the people.

But, of course, there’s another side to that story. Something other than trust is at stake. Commitment is the key. Loyalty follows trust, doesn’t it? Or does trust follow loyalty? One good reason for having a stewardship campaign—or in our case, a “Rainy Day” campaign so that we no longer will have to fear every rain—is to help us get clear about our loyalties, whether or not we really do love God and whether or not we really do believe that God will provide.

Henry Hitt Crane famously declared many years ago that the way one spells Love is L-O-Y-A-L-T-Y. If you say, “I love you,” but your loyalty is elsewhere, you don’t really love that person. Or

God. If you declare how much you love your church, but you don't attend or support it, then your love can rightly be questioned. It's not hard to figure out whom you love or what you love. Check out your bank statement or your date book or the people with whom you spend your time and effort. Love and loyalty are synonymous.

Those people in the wilderness complained because they wanted everything to be easy, they wanted success without much effort. Do not dismiss the Israelites as ancients. They are as contemporary as the people you will read about in this morning's ten-pound Chicago *Tribune*, because they do not want to make any sacrifices. They want God to do all the work so they can complain that even God is not gracious enough.

Roger Finke and Rodney Stark wrote a book that engendered a great deal of controversy when it was published a decade ago. When Martin Marty condemned it in *The Christian Century*, accusing the sociologists of manipulating data and disregarding history, I knew the book was worth reading. I love Marty, but he has not been a pastor for over five decades. He is the quintessential University of Chicago ivory-tower Simeon Stylites.

Stark and Finke say that the reason mainline churches are declining is that we have lost our entrepreneurial energy, our organizational flexibility and a clergy who know the needs and speak the language of ordinary people.

If we make it so easy for someone to become a member of a Disciples or UCC Church, say Finke and Stark, that person gets inside and immediately begins to think, "Hey, anything this easy cannot amount to much." We don't make many demands, we don't talk about loyalty and accountability the way our Alexander Campbell and Cotton Mather and John Winthrop did, and our members don't take us seriously. Moreover, they consider how easy it is to get out. Just stop coming, just drift away. If we do not take God's grace and demands for obedience seriously, how can we expect the world to take the church seriously?

One day I was waiting for my granddaughter, Miss Madalene Grace Cranley, as she danced in a class of similar, demure little girls. On one of the walls in the hallway of the Center for Performing Arts was a collage of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. I remembered Groucho Marx's assessment: "Ginger did everything Fred Astaire did. Only in high heels and backward."

Grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, declared, has a price. There is no grace without a cross. Grace without commitment is cheap and fraudulent. Grace is ours for free, but paradoxically we must respond with loyalty.

To have faith that even under the worst of circumstances, when life seems to look so easy for someone else, when the world seems to fall apart, God is still providing is a matter of trust. And grace.