

Sermon: Exodus 17:1-1 (Proper 21A)  
25 September 2011, Christ Church Riverdale  
The Rev. Robert C. Lamborn, Rector

*The sermon is based on this Bible passage:*

Exodus 17:1-7 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. <sup>2</sup>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?' <sup>3</sup>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?' <sup>4</sup>So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

How quickly the bad old days can turn into the good old days! The Israelites have barely gotten out of slavery in Egypt when they start to complain against Moses. The "honeymoon" lasted about two seconds and is over in a snap! First it's the Egyptian army coming after them: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" And God took care of it. Then it was not knowing where they would get enough food: "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve us all!" Sat by the fleshpots and ate their fill of bread? Hardly, but the bad old days of oppression and forced labor are starting to look like the good old days now! God took care of it, however; God provided manna and quail for them to eat.

The next problem, the next challenge, the complaint we hear today, has to do with not being able to find water: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" . . . "Is the LORD among us or not?" Now remember that the wilderness here is what we'd call a desert. Being able to find enough water was literally a matter of life and death. You can survive without food for a few weeks, but water? Only a few days. And the dry

climate only makes it even worse. When I made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land a couple of years ago, I was keenly aware of my thirst during the periods of time we were outside in the hot sun. And I knew that when I got back on the air-conditioned bus I could buy a bottle of water for a dollar! Imagine walking in the middle of a desert you've never seen before, not knowing when and how you are going to get your next drink of water. Having a supply of water is part of surviving in the desert; it's absolutely essential, so of course people are worried. And yet we also see a pattern emerging: In response to each of these serious challenges, each of these threats to survival, the people complain not just about the problem, but about how much better it was back in Egypt. They didn't have to face anything new back in Egypt. They knew where their next meal was coming from, and didn't have responsibility for their own leadership and life as a people.

One commentator on this part of the Book of Exodus writes, "The wilderness through which Israel traverses comes to be a metaphor for a zone of life not properly ordered and without the usual, reliable life-support systems."<sup>1</sup> I'll say! The previous zone of life in Egypt was ordered rigidly by slavery, and the life-support systems were at the whim of the powerful, but there was order and there were life-support systems, so it quickly starts to look like the good old days. In our world the pace of change seems like it only increases every day. Technology is changing not just the way we communicate, but how we think and relate. The role of institutions has been changing: The Postmaster General now wants to get rid of Saturday mail delivery, and it looks like the beginning of a phase-out of the Post Office itself. Relationships are changing: The legal definition of marriage has recently been expanded in New York and a few other states. Education is changing: I've learned from talking with a college student in education that cursive is starting to be dropped from school standards and curricula.

Whether we see particular changes as positive or negative, there's a cumulative effect of how we experience change itself. It can make us feel like we don't know what we can count on, insecure about where we can stand that isn't shifting ground, anxious enough to ask, "is the LORD among us or not?" And we face these changes in the midst of our own wilderness, our own desert experience where the usual life-support systems have been failing. Economists told us some time ago that the recession that began 3 years ago is over, yet it's clear that the recession is over for some but not for others. Recently we've heard disturbing news that things might be getting worse again. Is the LORD among us or not? Of course the short answer is,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol.1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 805.

“Yes, absolutely!” But the question is how do we know it, and then how do we live in response?

The experience of the Israelites in the desert gives us inspiration for the wildernesses of whatever type we face, and it all comes down to a daily dependence on God. The Israelites didn't have the military power to defeat the heavily-armed Egyptians, but in the moment God provided. The Israelites couldn't provide their own food, but day by day, God provided. (And remember how you couldn't save the food up? Any of the manna or quail kept until the next day went bad, except the day before Sabbath, when you could gather extra so you wouldn't have to on Sabbath.) There was no way the Israelites could carry all the water they needed for their journey. They had to depend on God to provide. In the same way, you can't come to church and take out a lifetime supply of Holy Communion so that you're set for the rest of your days! We depend on God day by day, week by week.

Even as long-held assumptions and longstanding institutions change, we can depend on God, one day at a time. We can depend on God to love us and sustain us in the midst of the changes we experience and *appropriately to the new situations we move into*. In other words, yes, the love of God changes because we change. When Caroline was a baby it wouldn't have been very loving of me to expect her to read every day or put her dirty clothes in the hamper, and it wouldn't be loving of me now to push her around in a stroller or feed her strained vegetables from a jar! Constant love is expressed in changing ways so that it remains *genuine* love. And that is the kind of love, the powerful love, that can bring water--can bring life itself--out of a rock!

In the South there's a Roman Catholic abbey with an extraordinary baptismal font. It's hewn out of a large, rough stone that once was a trading block where slaves were sold at auction. The inscription reads, "Upon this rock, men once were sold into slavery. Now upon this rock, through the waters of Baptism, men become free children of God."<sup>2</sup> Is the LORD among us or not? In whatever wilderness we wander, whatever desert we search for water in, no matter how good the old days seem, the answer is yes!—day by day . . . hour by hour . . . and moment by moment.

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<sup>2</sup> James C. Howell, "Is the LORD among us or not?" [http://day1.org/3156-is the lord among us or not](http://day1.org/3156-is-the-lord-among-us-or-not) accessed 21 September 2011.