

WATER FLUME AT ROCKY POINT

Sermon, March 27, 2011

Texts: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11

We just read the words of God speaking through the Psalmist (*Psalm 95:8-9*), "Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried Me, though they had seen what I did." He is referring to the event recorded in our Old Testament lectionary text from Exodus 17:1-7. In His temptation in the wilderness, Jesus had responded to the devil, "It is written, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus is quoting only partially from Deuteronomy 6:16; this was a familiar verse to any faithful Jew, and all would know by heart the full text, which is: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you did at Massah." Again, we just read about Massah/Meribah, this figurative and literal rocky point in their desert journey where the Hebrews ran out of water. This account of the experience at this rocky point of the wilderness wandering was well-etched on the collective memory of the Hebrew people. By the way, this word "test" in the Hebrew can also be translated "trial;" putting God to the *test* or putting God on *trial* are one and the same in the Hebrew language, which our translation of Psalm 95 underscores: "... where your fathers tested and tried Me." Putting God to the test is comparable to putting God in the role of defendant, demanding He prove Himself innocent, prove Himself justified, prove Himself to be really among His people as promised.

At this point of the Exodus journey the Israelites grew terrified they were going to die of thirst. You have to remember, though, as hinted in the Psalm, just how much they had recently seen of God's grace, intervention, protection and presence. In just the previous six months the Israelites had witnessed the ten plagues God sent upon Egypt compelling their release from bondage, they had seen the daily pillar of cloud protecting them from the sun by day and the nightly pillar of fire going on before them to lead the way, they had walked on dry land through the parted waters of the Red Sea and witnessed the drowning of the pursuing Egyptian army, they had experienced the miraculous sweetening of a reservoir of bitter water, and they had received the daily gift of manna from heaven. Despite experiencing all these incredible miracles and more in the past six months, nobody says, "Wow, I can't wait to see what God's going to do now! This is great! I wonder how He's going to come up with water out here?" Nobody says that. What they say is, "Why have you brought us into the desert to die? Are you among us or not?" What they do is essentially put God "on trial."

I'm told there's an experience of another Rocky Point etched on the collective memory of the Rhode Island people, as well. Virtually every adult Rhode Islander has some personal memory of happy times at nearby Rocky Point, whether it was first jobs, first dates, eating clamcakes and chowder at the World's Largest Shore Dinner Hall, attending concerts on the Midway, riding the Corkscrew, the Cyclone, the Freefall (*falling 13 stories at 55 mph*), riding the Music Express, the Bumper Cars or the Water Flume. Since 1847, when it was first used for nature outings, Rocky Point was Rhode Island's working-class shoreline resort. In 1872, the **New York Times** hailed Rocky Point as "one of the most delightful places upon our New-England coast," a place "... exceedingly popular with the masses as a delightful spot to spend a few days from the hurry and hustle of daily life." Rocky Point was a place of relaxation, refreshment and, when the midway rides came in later years, a place of delightful amusement and recreation. The initial allure of Rocky Point was the land itself, 123 acres of beach, meadows, wetlands, woods, and dramatic rocky elevations overlooking the entire upper Narragansett Bay. Did you know Rocky Point was the site of the first use of a telephone by a United States President? In 1877 Alexander Graham Bell called from Providence to President Rutherford B. Hayes at Rocky Point. (*The President's first words on the phone to the excited Mr. Bell were, "Would you please speak a little more slowly?"*) It was just a little later, May 10, 1877, that the first phone was installed in the White House (*the White House phone number? One.*). In 1900 the **New York Times** dubbed Rocky Point "the Coney Island of Rhode Island." John Jacob Astor often visited with his wealthy Newport friends to sample the entertainments. Baseball, too, became a draw for Rhode Islanders to visit Rocky Point. Those who were at Rocky Point for a 1914 game of the Providence Grays would have seen Babe Ruth hit a home run out of the park and into the Narragansett Bay. George M. Cohen first performed "Yankee Doodle Dandy" at Rocky Point. The Three Stooges made many appearances at Rocky Point (*before they went to work for the Rhode Island government*). Unfortunately, the second oldest amusement park in America finally drowned in a sea of debt and closed its doors in 1995, the year before I arrived in Rhode Island.

Well, in our Old Testament reading, the people of Israel had come to their own Rocky Point in their desert journey, and it was no resort. But they are about to discover through the grace of God this Rocky Point did indeed have a wonderfully refreshing Water Flume, though they did not yet see it! You might say Moses was between a rock and a hard place; the hard place being the desert wilderness through which they had traveled, the rock being this barren, rocky, arid wilderness where they had arrived. Moses had this unruly mob on his hands quarreling with him for water, and we are told they are so angry they are about to stone him, blaming him for bringing them out into the wilderness to die of thirst. They ask what is starting to become a recurring question: "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Lest we get a bit smug from our vantage point, I think we know something of how they feel, if we are honest. Many of us have been there; some may be there right now. We encounter a personal crisis or threat and no matter

how good God has been to us all along up to that point in our life's journey, we can (and often do) call into question God's presence, providence and purpose in our lives. We are working hard at a career, experiencing some success and financial stability, and suddenly there are cutbacks which result in downsizing, and we find ourselves looking for employment ... something that has happened to too, too many people in our state. Suddenly we are unsure of all that here-to-fore we took for granted. We begin to question everything ... we question our ability, we question our future, we question even our very identity ... and we wonder: is the Lord with us or not? Or we move through life managing its minor hardships (*which at the time may seem major but looking back we see they really were minor in the grand scheme of things*), all along taking for granted the gift of health, only to be suddenly confronted with a life-threatening illness ... be it ours or the health crisis of a loved one. And we wonder: is the Lord with us or not? In such times of crises, sometimes we pray with a deeper intensity and passion. But to be honest, sometimes we question whether or not we should be praying at all, our faith in God's providence is so shaken. Well, Moses is our model to follow. What does he do? Moses takes the crisis to God. There at this Rocky Point he makes a "phone call" to the President of the Universe. This is his fundamental reflex of faith! He cries out to the Lord. "What am I to do?!"

God replies, in so many words, "Put Me on trial."

Imagine this drama in Exodus 17 as a courtroom scene. The people file suit against God and His representative, Moses. It's The People vs. God. The complaint: God is accused of abandoning Israel, of leading them into the wilderness just to let them die of thirst. *"Why did you bring us out of Egypt to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?"* Moses replies, *"Why do you want to put God to the test?"* As mentioned, the Hebrew word here can be translated both as "test" and "trial;" let's go with the translation "trial." *"Why do you want to put God on trial?"* Moses asks. The people want a trial, so God accommodates.

God directs Moses to walk on before the people, which is the posture of a judge entering a courtroom. Moses the Lawgiver, Moses the Judge, is to be followed by the elders, the representatives of the people; they are the witnesses for the prosecution. Moses is directed to take in his hand the staff with which he struck the Nile. This is the same staff with which he called the plagues of judgment against Egypt. Moses is to pass before the people, with this symbol of judgment in hand, accompanied by the witnesses for the prosecution. In this courtroom scene, God says to Moses (17:6), *"I will stand before you on the rock."* As God is invisible, He gives a point of reference, a point of focus, for the people ... He *identifies* Himself with the rock. God Himself becomes the Rocky Point. *"You see that rock; well, that's Me. That's where I am."* He stands in the position of defendant; God is "in the dock" on the rock, identified with the rock.

God commands Moses, *"Strike the rock!"* In effect, God is commanding, *"In the presence of this assembly, strike ME with the rod of judgment, Moses!"* And Moses lifts the rod of judgment and strikes the rock, the rock which is symbolically identified with God. The imagery portrayed here is significant: God is not guilty. He never abandoned the Israelites, but he nevertheless bears the judgment. God the Rock is struck with the rod of judgment, and what happens as a result? The blessing of God flows out in the form of water which nourishes the people of God. Now, the people should stand before God the Judge; God does not stand before people to be judged. He has not abandoned His people, but His people are all too quick to forget Him and abandon His ways when things get a bit difficult! In this trial scene, though, God accepts the role reversal. You know, this is almost a sermon in itself, but this is nothing less than the message of the Gospel. Jesus Christ was innocent and took the position of defendant. We deserve judgment, He does not. But the rod of God's judgment came crashing down upon the sinless Christ on the cross on Calvary, as He was stricken for our sin. Because Christ bore the judgment of God by being stricken on the cross, we may receive the outpoured blessings of God. Out of the stricken Rock of Christ flow streams of Living Water to nourish the people of God.

God has this amazing ability to work in and through hardship to reveal to us deeper levels of His saving grace, to reveal to us deeper levels of His power and love for us. God is with us in the crisis, waiting to reveal Himself to us in and through it. In our lectionary Epistle lesson, the apostle Paul, who is no stranger to such hardship and suffering, exhorts the church at Rome to rejoice in rocky adversity, because *"... suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope ... and such hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit whom He has given us."* (Romans 5:3-5)

Yes, God has a wonderful way of making the rocky points of our lives places of His divine refreshment, sources where we may drink deeply from the living water of His nourishing spirit, places where we may discover deeper levels of His grace and love. As we trust Him, keep conversation with Him, cry out to Him, eventually we discover His presence refreshing us ... sustaining us in those moments when we have lost confidence in ourselves, giving us hope in those moments when we have lost confidence in life itself. Thirsts are quenched, crises are endured, life is renewed, and we find the strength to go on. And unlike Rhode Island's Rocky Point, the Water Flume at God's Rocky Point is still in business; Jesus Christ has paid off all the debts and more!

Are you between a rock and a hard place? Well, God is standing before you on that rock, not only waiting to reveal Himself to you in and through the crisis, but more, waiting to refresh you and give you new life through the grace of His outpoured Spirit. Call out to Him. You will not be disappointed.