

Wilderness: Testing God

Exodus 17:1-7

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About the time we got married, my then husband and I picked out a nice, two bedroom apartment to be our new home. We wanted the biggest place we could afford so there would be plenty of room for his two kids to come visit. Still, there were only two bedrooms and the kids, a fourteen-year-old boy and an eleven-year-old girl, were really too old to share a room. So the plan was that my stepson would sleep on the pullout couch in the living room.

Now, you might think he was resentful that his little sister got her own room and he had to sleep in the living room. Not at all. Sleeping in the living room actually seemed really cool. He had immediate access to the kitchen and the refrigerator. The TV was there so he could stay up late and watch television shows. And, since this was the olden days before iphones and Alexa and all the other ways we now listen to music, he was especially excited because he had unfettered access to the stereo.

The kids visited every other weekend and one week night a week. It was maybe their second or third visit to the new apartment when my stepson asked his dad if he could listen to the stereo after everyone had gone to bed. His dad said sure - as long as he kept the volume down.

The rest of us headed to our rooms, leaving him in the living room with music playing softly on the stereo. We had just settled in for the night, when the music got a little bit louder. "Oh, it's not that bad," my husband thought, and decided to ignore it. Then, not long after, the music got louder again. And a few minutes later, louder again. By now, Bob was getting irritated. It was time for the whole family to be sleeping. Yet, with our wedding not long before and this move to a new apartment, everything was still new and tenuous and he hesitated to speak to his son about it.

Then, I had an epiphany. "Bob, he wants you to go out there and tell him to turn it down. He's waiting for you. He's looking for you to come set a limit because he needs to know that you still care. There's been so much change. We got married. I've become the kids' stepmom. He needs to see that you're still his father."

Sure enough, when Bob went into the living room and said something, his son readily turned down the music. No complaints. And, most telling of all, then he asked his dad for a hug.

We have arrived at the third weekend in Lent - our third week of walking in the wilderness with Jesus. Lent is a time for spiritual reflection - of searching in our own hearts and spirits to see what we might find standing between us and the full and joyful relationship with God. The first week, we talked about Jesus and the time he spent in the wilderness. Last week, we talked about doubt, doubting God exists or doubting the tenets of our faith. Today, we're exploring those times in our lives when we are in crisis and we turn to God and say, "Okay, God. If you're really there, if you really love me, show me! Do something!"

This is where we find the people of Israel in our scripture reading for today. God has freed them from slavery to Egypt and promised them that eventually they would arrive in the Promised Land. Moses does his best to lead them, but in story after story in Exodus, they are discontented and filled with complaints. The water is too bitter to drink. We're hungry. Why did the Lord take us away from Egypt where we always had enough to eat? And each time, God responds by providing them with what they need.

Still they are restless and complaining until finally we find them at Rephidim where they discover there is no water. This time, they argue with Moses and demand, "Give us water to drink"! And Moses, who is getting a bit exasperated, says, "Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?"

It's a good question. Why are they testing God? Why do we? But, let's look at the context a little more broadly. These people have followed in blind faith as Moses told them to paint blood above their doorways so they would be passed over by the angel of death. They have fled their homes in Egypt and been chased after by Pharaoh's army. They have been asked to trust that the Red Sea would not crash down and drown them. They have been asked to believe that they will have the food they need and fresh water and that someday, they will arrive in this so-called Promised Land.

They are weary and they're scared. Life has turned upside down. Nothing is stable, nothing is sure. Every day that passes, their fear builds and they lose patience with the not knowing. You can almost hear their prayers. "If you are there, God, we need some proof. Prove you love us. Prove you're going to get us to this so-called Promised Land. Prove that we will be better off than we were as slaves in Egypt. Because right now, there's no water and we're thirsty. This is the barren wilderness. We have been travelling for days, carrying all our belongings in the heat of the sun. We are parched. We're going to die here. If we are so special to you, if we are your beloved, give us reason to hope. Show yourself, do something!"

And so it is with us. We go along through challenge after challenge in our lives. We believe in God. We love God. We give thanks for the promises of resurrection. But, at some point, some moment comes along, when we can't continue on blind faith anymore. We turn to God and say, "Show me you're there! Help me! Do something!"

If you have ever wondered if you want to get up the next morning. If you have ever looked at yourself and thought I don't know who I am or who I have become. If you have sat at the bedside of someone who is suffering. If you have run out of ideas for how to help your child who is struggling with depression. If you have been deeply depressed yourself. Their story is yours.

At some point in our lives, we have or will look to God in fear and desperation and ask that God somehow prove that God is God and can do something about our pain. Of course, the other way we may express it is by trying to make a deal with God. This kind of bargaining is one of the stages of grief. "If you heal my sick partner, I promise I will start going to church again." But, we do it in other ways, as well. "If you help me get out of debt, I promise to tithe." "If you keep that cop from stopping me, I promise I'll never drink before I drive again." "If you make the schools re-open, I promise to be a much better mom to my kids."

All of this comes down to the struggle we have as humans with feeling out of control. It is the emotional and spiritual expression of the doubt we began to talk about last week. When we are in a time of crisis, when we feel threatened, uncertain, and insecure, we desperately call out for God to show us God is there. If not in words, then in turning up the volume on the stereo or arguing with Moses.

Of course, if we return to the people of Israel in the wilderness, what they cannot see - what their fear blinds them to - is that God has been there all along. When the water at one campsite was too bitter, God made it sweet. When they were hungry in the desert, God sent manna for them to eat. And when they arrive in this place with no water, God provides them water. God, too, is there. "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it and the people will be able to drink."

If you are wandering in a wilderness this Lent that leads you to a place where you desperately need to see and know that God is there, that God knows your fear or anxiety or suffering, perhaps you are looking for a sign. Perhaps you are testing God just as the people tested God in the wilderness or my stepson tested his father - waiting to see if God will do something to show that you are worthy, you are loved, that everything will be okay.

It is such a human response - one we learn from our relationships with each other. Yet, I think that when it comes to God, it is unnecessary. God is so much bigger than we can comprehend. God is infinite and eternal. And God is always present - if not visible to us, in the ones who hold our hands, who pray with us, who walk with us, who are called, like Moses, to look to the rock of Horeb where God stands waiting.

May it be so. Amen.