

Come to the Water: Providing Numbers 20:1-13; Matthew 6:25-33

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Six years ago this week, we entered into an experience most of us never expected to have - the fast spread of a global pandemic. Covid-19 seemed to come out of nowhere and filled our lives with fear and uncertainty. Across the country, Americans' anxiety shot up as we worried about ourselves, each other, our loved ones, our jobs, our schools - everything, really.

Even then we knew we wouldn't fully understand the impact of the pandemic for years to come. But, with the development of a vaccine, things began to get better. Slowly, we returned to what life had been like before. We went back to the office, to school, to church, to parties and book clubs and sporting events. And our anxiety went down as we felt the ground once again solidly under our feet.

Unfortunately, in the last year or so, that anxiety has been coming back again. According to an article in "Psychology Today", research in late 2025 and early 2026 reveals "more than half of adults report clinical levels of anxiety, and more than half report feeling more anxious now than they did a year ago." Meanwhile, 73% of American adults reported "experiencing elevated levels of anxiety related to the U.S. political climate, with many describing their feelings as anxious, exhausted, and even angry". Even before the start of the war in Iran, 67% of U.S. adults also reported feeling anxious about global events, including concerns about the economy, safety, and climate change". Plus, "70% of Americans report experiencing high levels of financial anxiety."

I don't need the statistics to tell me this is true. I feel it in myself, and I see it in the people I talk with - in friends, family members, congregation members. Perhaps you do, as well. Over the last year or so, our society has become increasingly chaotic, and we feel it in our hearts, our minds, and our pocketbooks. Yet our faith gives us a source of hope and stability if we choose to receive it.

This Lent our theme has been God's wondrous works through water in scripture and in our lives. This rollercoaster of anxiety we have been on over the last six years sometimes reminds me of another story about the people of Israel as they journeyed for forty years through the wilderness on their way to the promised land.

Last week, we heard about their dramatic escape from Egypt when God parted the Red Sea. Today's story comes near the end of their journey. After nearly forty years of wandering, uncertainty, and fear, we find them traveling through an area known to be especially dry - possibly only getting four inches of rain a year. The journey has been long. They have lost many of their companions along the way. At this point, they are tired, anxious, and thirsty.

And when they get anxious or afraid, they do what a lot of us tend to do, too. They assume the worst and they look for someone to blame. You might remember from the Red Sea story when the Israelites saw the Pharaoh approaching them with his army and chariots, they turned on

Moses, saying, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? ...It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

Now, some forty years later, they’re still saying the same things. “Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.” As Greg Lawton, our youth faith formation director said to me recently, “nobody is better at complaining than the Israelites in the desert”.

For forty years, this scenario played itself out over and over again. Every time they faced a challenge, the people doubted and worried and complained and blamed because it was so hard for them to trust, to have faith, that God was there taking care of them. Nonetheless, over and over again, God provided for them. Food and water, shelter and leadership. And once again in this story, when Moses strikes the rock, water flows abundantly, freely, quenching the thirst of the Israelites and their animals. God provides. God cares for them.

Like the Israelites, we live in a time when holding onto faith in a God who is actively at work in the world is increasingly challenging. With so much cruelty and hate, violence and now war surrounding us, with another disturbing headline in the news every day, our doubt and cynicism grow. How do we believe that through all this, God is still watching out for us, still opening new paths, new possibilities, new resources to lead us into abundant life?

If we’re honest, doubting God is the easy way at times like this. Faith in God, trust in the power of good to overcome evil, takes work and risk and a willingness to depend on God that we’re often uncomfortable with. If we can’t rely on ourselves, it’s easier to give up than to place our trust in a God we cannot see.

Yet, perhaps learning to be vulnerable, to depend on God, is exactly what we need. Recently, I had a conversation with a woman whose relative had just received some devastating news. His cancer had spread throughout his body, and the prognosis was not good. She said, “I don’t even know what to pray for now”. At the time, I suggested praying that, for whatever time he has left, he is comfortable and able to engage with the people who love him. Then I read this commentary on the Israelites in the wilderness in which Rev. Dr. Robert Rayburn says, “Perhaps the first lesson is that we should not, must not, shy away from the challenge of faith...”

And then he goes on to say this thing that seems almost crazy in our world of data and proofs and artificial intelligence. He says, “Perhaps every Christian ought all the time to be praying for things that would be impossible apart from the blessing and working of God. When we pray only for those things that might very well happen whether or not anyone is praying, we do not keep alive within ourselves the spirit of active dependence on the Lord. When we ask the Lord for what we otherwise, in terms of human calculation, have no reason to expect, we keep alive in our souls an active, working, restless dependence on the Lord.” In other words, we keep our hope alive - hope that we, and the world, so desperately need.

One of the most unsettling things about this story of water flowing from the rock to quench the thirst of the Israelites is how it ends. Yes, God comes through for them, providing just

what they need. But then God punishes Moses, telling him that he will never cross into the promised land. After all the years that Moses has listened to God, done what God asked, and led this group of complaining, doubting people through the desert, Moses will die before the Israelites arrive in Canaan.

What I think is interesting is why. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, "The Message" is a bit easier to understand. "God said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you didn't trust me, didn't treat me with holy reverence in front of the People of Israel, you two aren't going to lead this company into the land that I am giving them." When the time came for God to provide water to the thirsty travelers, God told Moses to simply stand by the rock and the water would pour forth. Instead, in his doubt and frustration, Moses struck the rock. It seems like such a little thing. Yet, what it shows is that he lost faith - and worse yet, he revealed his doubts to the Israelites rather than showing them that God was there with them, caring for them.

Which makes me think about how our challenge isn't only to foster our own faith in difficult times. To pray those prayers that seem unlikely to be answered. To trust that God is at work. It's also to share our faith with others. To reveal God's goodness to those around us who are struggling just like we are, or even more.

Marshall Segal writes about this, "We get so worked up over our hardships...that we forget that God's glory is breaking into our dark and broken world - and that it's happening through us (through our faith, our worship, our fellowship, our eating and drinking, our witness)."

Throughout this sermon series, we have talked about how because we are made in God's image, we are called to offer to the world today the same care that God offers in God's wonderful work through water. We create as God creates. We cleanse as God cleanses. We protect as God protects. And we provide as God provides.

When you pack lunches for the housing insecure or take a meal to Alpha House. When you protect the rights of immigrants or warmly welcome a trans person to our worship. When you go to Lansing and advocate for those who are insecure. When you donate to digging wells in Africa or building a school in Costa Rica. Whenever you offer God's love to someone who needs it, you give them reason to have faith, to trust God, to hope.

Centuries after Moses, Jesus spoke to another crowd of people who were anxious and worried, too. In this beautiful passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages his listeners to look around them for evidence of God's love and provision. He reassures them, and us, that if God cares for even the smallest of living beings - the lilies and the birds - then certainly God cares for us, as well. We humans who are made in God's own image. Don't worry, Jesus says. Instead, look for the kingdom of God unfolding all around you. As you enter this week when, undoubtedly, there will be news that shakes your faith, may you open your eyes to all the glimmers of God working in the world and may you offer those glimmers to whomever you meet.

May it be so. Amen.

