

## **“I Will Be Standing in Front of You”**

**Exodus 17: 1-17**

**March 8, 2026, Home Moravian Church**

At first, the Israelites saw the Lord present everywhere.

When they learned from Moses that four hundred years of slavery in Egypt would soon be over, they understood that the Lord had seen their misery; and they bowed down and worshipped.

When they followed Moses out of Egypt, they saw the Lord’s presence in the pillar of cloud that led them by day, and the pillar of fire that led them by night; and they followed.

When they reached the Red Sea, with Pharaoh’s army chasing them and the water in front of them, they cried out to the Lord; and when the water divided and they ran safely through, they lifted to the Lord their songs of praise.

That was at first.

But the journey got harder. Difficult as it is to imagine, the race through the Red Sea may not, in retrospect, have seemed as bad as the awful days and weeks that followed: trudging through the desert, growing more and more hot, and tired, and thirsty, and hungry, and afraid. And, it seems, the more afraid the people became, the less they could see the presence of the Lord.

There are many ways to read the Israelites’ 40-year journey through the desert. We can play up the irony, as in the book of Numbers, when the Israelites are so sick of eating manna—the food the Lord provided to save their lives—that they start reciting menus from their days in slavery: the fish! The cucumbers! The garlic! We can use the stories to scold ourselves by

relating the Israelites' faithlessness to our own. We can highlight themes of doubt, lack of patience, foolish choices: the way the Israelites, under pressure, declared they would rather go back to being slaves than risk death in the wilderness.

These are things we can see from outside the story. But if we put ourselves inside the story, walking beside the Israelites through the wilderness, what will we *hear*? Maybe, voices: weary old men, fretful children, desperate mothers. Hearing their voices, maybe we'll hear that every person on this journey is afraid.

In Egypt, the Israelites must have feared the plagues as much as the Egyptians—especially when children began to die. Leaving Egypt, they were terrified of Pharaoh's army. Now that they've reached the wilderness, they fear they will die of hunger—or, in today's story, of thirst, which kills faster than starvation. What mother could bear to watch her children die of thirst? The Israelites are filled with fear, and fear has made them angry; and when people are angry, what they tend to look for is not the presence of the Lord, but a person they can blame.

"They camped at Rephidim," says the text, "but there was no water." Who camps where there is no water? *Moses*. Moses is to blame! This whole horrible journey is Moses' fault! And, weirdly, where you'd think the person who has gotten them into one mess after another would be the last person they'd trust to fix anything, isn't that what we expect when we blame someone for a catastrophe? Kind of a revenge-trust. *You created this situation; you fix it*. Certainly that's what the Israelites demand of Moses. As it says in the text, "The people quarreled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.'"

Even Moses can't be patient forever. "Why do you quarrel with me?" he demands. "Why do you test the Lord?"

Moses might be giving the Israelites too much credit. Test the Lord? The Israelites appear to have forgotten all about the Lord. The Lord who saw their misery and inspired their gratitude; the Lord whom they saw in a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire; the Lord to whom they cried with an army behind them and a sea ahead; the Lord to whom they sang praises when they collapsed in relief on the far shore; do they no longer see the Lord? If they even remember their identity as the Lord's chosen people, they seem to have lost their grasp on the promise that undergirds that identity: the promise that the Lord is always with them.

If the Israelites still pray, perhaps their prayers amount to little more than *fix it*. When people are afraid, what they want even more than someone to blame is someone who can *fix it*. The Lord protects? Well, we need protection now: *fix it*. The Lord provides? We need provision: *fix it*. We will not remember the Lord is among us unless we see that the Lord has fixed things the way we want them. We will remember the presence of the Lord when we see the presence of water.

Moses, too, is afraid, fearing the angry people might take his life. But even in his fear, Moses remembers to turn to the Lord: "What am I to do with these people? They are almost angry enough to stone me." And hear how the Lord responds:

" '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. 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."

And... what happened? *We don't actually know*. The text just says that Moses did what the Lord said, "in the sight of the elders of Israel." The emphasis is on sight; so what did the elders see? Presumably, water coming out of the rock, as promised. But remember what else was

promised? “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb.” While rejoicing in the water, did the elders look up and see what else was right in front of them?

The Israelites will get through the desert. But until they stop looking for fixes and start looking for God’s presence, the Israelites will never get through their fear. They will continue to limp from crisis to crisis, always afraid—which means they will always be angry—and missing the soul-sustaining presence of the Lord. Until the Israelites regroup themselves in that presence, they will not truly be God’s people; they will be only a lost, loosely gathered group of wanderers, whose fear inspires their anger and whose anger inspires their demand for a leader who will *fix it*.

That’s what we see from outside their story. But we should also take the time to get inside the story, and listen to the voices. God calls us to dismiss our fear, but not to dismiss the people who are afraid: the refugee who has left an unsafe place in hope of a better life, the soldier forced into war, the patient with intractable illness, the family member who sees loss of a loved one on the horizon. God’s call to dismiss our fear does not mean the world is not a scary place. But, like Moses, we can remember to cry out to the Lord: not just in our own distress, but on behalf of those who are also afraid. And we can remind ourselves that looking anxiously for fixes can distract us from the presence of the Lord, which sustains us on our seemingly impossible journeys, where things will often not be fixed as we’d like them, and sometimes cannot be fixed at all.

Also: When the Lord provides, humanity has a way of making a mess of the provision. The place in front of the rock at Horeb, where water presumably gushed from the rock? Moses named it “Massah and Meribah,” which means “testing and quarreling.” That reminds me of a story in Genesis, where Isaac’s servants dig a well, and the locals come over and start a fight,

insisting that the water belongs to them. So Isaac's servants dig another, and the same thing happens. And Isaac names the wells "Contention" and "Enmity." What God provides as a source of refreshment, we frightened, thirsty human beings can turn into a source of quarreling and testing, contention and enmity—all the time failing to see the presence of the Lord, standing right in front of us.

I want to share a story from the Moravian pastor Jeff Coppage, who has given me permission to share it—indeed, when I said, "I won't use your name," he said, "Please use my name." Many years ago, Jeff went into Baptist hospital for a lung biopsy. This particular procedure required a stay in the highest level of ICU, where Jeff was allowed to see his wife for only 5 minutes each hour. He wanted to be moved to a different ICU, where his wife could stay with him. He argued with the nurse in charge; she was not impressed. Then Jeff remembered that visiting rules tended to be different for chaplains, so he asked—no, let's say *demanded*—to see a chaplain. The chaplain who showed up was his friend Jay Foster. Jeff poured out his problem to Jay, and begged him to *fix it*. And Jay said, "Friend, I can go and work on solving your problem; or I can use that time to sit here with you. I'll do whichever one you want."

Jay offered a choice: problem-solving, or presence? Jeff chose presence. "At that moment," Jeff says, "my entire body relaxed; and to this day, that moment remains a powerful experience of my feeling the presence of Christ." Jeff chose presence, and found both comfort and courage in what was right in front of him.

Every person on this journey is afraid. When we are afraid, we blame our human leaders, and then demand that they provide a fix for our human fears. And all the time, the Lord is standing on the rock in front of us. In our thirstiest times, let us drink deeply of the presence of the Lord; and let us find comfort and courage as the people of God, again and again. Amen.

