

March 27, 2019 – Exodus 17:1-7, 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, John 4:5-14 (Lenten Midweek)

“Water, water, every where, / And all the boards did shrink; / Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink.” This rather famous line comes from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” And this particular part of the poem tells the story of a sailing ship that gets trapped in the middle of a perfectly calm, windless ocean.

Without even the faintest breeze to push them to land and scorched by the burning sun overhead, they soon run out of fresh water, go insane, and die of dehydration. Leaving the narrator himself as the only survivor of the doomed ship. It's a tragic, terrifying moment.

But one that is fairly accurate in many ways. Because running out of drinkable water is a very, very dangerous thing, whether you're in the middle of the ocean or the middle of the desert, as the Israelites found themselves in our Old Testament lesson today.

Food isn't really a big deal. You can go a day without food without any ill effects. In fact, you might end up a bit healthier for it. You can go a week without food and need only minimal medical attention. Gandhi went 21 days without food and survived. Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness. You can go a long time without food.

But water is so much more important. We are not camels. Our bodies are not designed to store water like they store calories.

Just a day without water and you'll start suffering. Three days and you need significant medical treatment. And after a week without water, most people are dead. And that's under ideal conditions. Add poor health or heavy physical activity or high heat to the equation and you can dehydrate in a matter of hours.

So it's not terribly surprising to hear the Israelites begin to express such concern over having enough water. This is important. This is at the top of the list of priorities. And making camp at Rephidim, a place in the middle of the wilderness near Mount Sinai without a drop of water for miles, has to make them worried.

And so they begin to grumble. They begin to quarrel. They begin to complain. “*Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock.*” They ask. It's a question they ask a lot during the Exodus.

Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to die by Pharaoh's chariots by the Red Sea? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to die of hunger? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to be killed by the giants in Canaan?

Over and over again. It's not just that they have normal, human worry about food and water and danger. It's that they are constantly looking back to Egypt. They are constantly tempted by what they had there.

Never mind the fact that they were slaves. Never mind the fact that they were forced to endure hard labor. Never mind the fact that Pharaoh was murdering their children.

No, all of that is forgotten. Why? Well, because that's what sin does. When given the choice between trusting God and trusting men, we will always trust men over God.

Egypt had nothing for them. It was a place of death. But in the sinfulness of their heart, that was still better than having faith in God. Faith in God's Word. Faith in God's promises.

Water, water, everywhere, but not a drop to drink. The Israelites looked at Egypt and they saw water, water, everywhere. They saw the security of the Nile itself. The great river-god of the Egyptian pantheon. Giving water to them and their crops.

It was water, water everywhere... but not a drop to drink. Because going back to Egypt meant going back to death. The physical death of Pharaoh and his slave-drivers. And the spiritual death of abandoning the Lord for false gods.

We look at the Israelites and we wonder, “How could they have been so blind? How could they think so fondly about such cruel conditions? How could they grumble and complain so much?” But are we so much different?

Because every day we are called out of Egypt to the Promised Land of God's promises. We know that sin is the pathway to death. That idolatry is the pathway to hell. That God's Word is life and truth.

But every day, we still sin. Every day, we still idolize ourselves and the things of this world. Every day, we place the busyness of life above God's Word. Every day, we look back at Egypt fondly, even though it's a place of death.

Water, water, everywhere, but not a drop to drink. That's what this life is. A ocean of water, surrounding us on every side. Tempting us to drink. To relieve our thirst. Even though we know full well that it is poison. That it will only leave us thirstier. That it will only lead to death.

The only way we are ever going to relieve our thirst – the only way the Israelites were ever going to relieve their thirst – is to to drink the water the Lord gives us. To see the Lord as he really is. Not just another god of Egypt or another god of this world. But the giver of every good gift. And the only one who can supply our need.

And so Moses took his staff, the very staff he used to strike the god of the Nile and turn it to undrinkable blood. He took his staff and he struck the rock. And out of it poured life-giving water for Israel.

And the place became known as Massah and Meribah. The place where God did not strike his people down for their quarreling and testing. But proved that he was faithful to his promises and powerful to give us everything they needed.

For us, we have our own Massah and Meribah. Our own place of quarreling and testing. Our own place where the rock was struck and life-giving water flowed for us.

But it wasn't in the desert of Rephidim. It was on the mountain of Calvary. For there we quarreled with the Son of God, demanding to know if the Lord was among us or not. There we tested him, telling him, “If you are the Son of God, save yourself.” There we beat him over the head, pounded a hammer against his hands and feet. Shoved a spear into his side. And out of it flowed blood and water.

The water of life, that we may never be thirsty again. The spiritual drink from the spiritual rock that is Jesus Christ. A water welling up inside of us to eternal life.

Jesus told the woman at the well, “*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again.*” Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink. The water she was drinking would only leave her thirsty again. The water she was drinking had led her to divorce and adultery and immorality. The water she was drinking was the water of sin. And it would lead only to death.

We know that water well. But God gives us a much better water. And though it may have flowed from the Rock of Christ 2000 years ago, it still flows for us today. As our opening hymn reminded us, the Church isn't just a building, nor just a place where God's people gather.

No, it's the place where living water, springing from eternal love, well-supplies each one of the sons and daughters of this congregation. A place where fear and fainting are removed, for the river flowing from Christ's side assuages our thirst. And his grace never fails from age to age.

That's what we receive here in Word and Sacrament. That's what those words of Absolution are for you. That's what the Body and Blood of Christ are for you. That's what the Word of God is for you. A stream of living-water flowing from Christ's side.

Given to us to turn our eyes away from Egypt. Away from the things of this world. Back to the giver of every good things. Who has led us out of Egypt. And who will bring us yet to his Promised Land. Amen.