

SERMON: 2017/10/01 - BTR

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front.]

Moses hitting the rock in the wilderness to release water.

So, the Hebrews - also called "the Israelites," and later, "the Jews" - were wandering (around) in the desert. It was very unpleasant. And even though God was feeding them directly by "showers" of "ma-na" every day, there was lots to complain about: for example, they kept being attacked by thievish camel-raiders; there was hardly any shade to relax in; they kept getting sand in their shoes [remove shoe to pour out some sand: look horrified]; and, worst of all, they were just so thirsty!

Finally, they came to the foot of a great big mountain called 'Horeb', and they sat down on the ground and said: "*Enough!* No more. We're not going any further until God gives us something to drink."

Well, Moses, their leader, felt very embarrassed. "You shouldn't test God," he said. "You shouldn't criticise and complain about Him. After all, He's already given you so many blessings."

But they wouldn't listen. And they started chanting: "Water. Water. Water."

So, Moses fell on his knees and he prayed to Heaven, saying "Lord, what shall I do?! (He was a bit scared, you see, of this angry crowd.)

And God replied! He said: [deep voice] "Moses! Moses my friend, do not worry. Go, grab your staff, and strike the rock I'll show you. I will give my people what they need."

And that's what Moses did. [Pick up a long, straight stick. Adjust grip. Like a batsman in baseball] He took his staff and he hit this big rock so hard that it cracked open and *whoosh!* A torrent of water came gushing out and drenched everybody there. [Pull a water-pistol from hiding and squirt congregation.]

Wow! God had done it again. Another miracle.

And why? Because He cares about us and our needs. We just have to trust Him - and ask.

Let's pray: Father, we pray you will help us, by the Holy Spirit, to be more like Moses: trusting You even in difficult circumstances, amen.

[Ask children to depart]

So, once more, in our *Exodus* reading, we hear how God *springs* - that's a pun, by the way - to provide for the Hebrew people, the Jews.

It's so predictable, isn't it? Like clockwork.

They experience some sort of discomfort, they begin to suffer, they complain loudly, and God - *graciously* - intervenes. And does so with a grand gesture: providing *much* more than was even hoped for.

And that's the Gospel, right? The *unique* message of the Church:

We all need a fresh start; we've all messed up and let God down. And so He gives us a way to do that - to be forgiven, and that's why He calls on us to 'repent' [Mt. 3:2,4:17; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 13:3, etc.]. To "bend the knee."

And that's the point of the Cross: to make things right.

But God goes above and beyond here too, for He *then* 'pours' out [see: Mk. 2:22] the '*living waters*' that are the Holy Spirit to re-make our humanity, 'enabling [us]'; and here, of course, I'm quoting Saint Paul from this morning's *Philippians* reading, 'to will and to work for His good pleasure.' [2:13]

In other words, we get instant purity thanks to Christ's sacrifice on the cross *and* the means to maintain that status - that standing with God.

Likewise, when Moses struck that rock open, the Hebrews' thirst was immediately satisfied, but not just *only* on that day at Rephidim, for we *never*, in fact, hear of the Hebrews being thirsty *again* during their wilderness hike to Canaan. Day after day, week after week.

If God's provision, then, was reliably generous, why do they keep moaning?

And *why* doesn't God behave the same way now? Lots of people have desperate needs in the world. Why doesn't He treat them the same way? And me too! When I'm hungry or need a drink? Why do I have to go to Kroger? Why doesn't He give me what I want right now always when I want it? Hm?

The answer, I think, to both these questions, is the same.

Consider this: my old boss kept chickens in his yard. And all day long they roamed around free, pecking and squawking, digging up his flowerbeds and scratching around in the compost heap, and they could, at anytime, have just walked away: there was no fence around his property and though there was a hedge, it was full of gaps and easily passible to a small animal beneath its

lowest branches. So day after day, week after week, they had ubiquitous opportunities to escape, *and yet they didn't*.

Why? Because my boss and his wife were a dependable source of good food. And that dependability of satisfactory sustenance acted like a powerful, invisible tether on the birds: The unnatural regularity of being supplied cereal circumscribed their natural instinct to roam, to migrate - and to hide from large, lumbering bipeds.

After all, why embark on some risky adventure when what they craved was right there?

And people aren't very different to chickens.

Have you heard of the expression, "helicopter parenting"?

It's the name given to an American phenomenon of mums and dads over-indulging their children, and it seems to be having a very negative effect on our nation's young people, causing what is being called an 'epidemic' of neuroses [n.1], and this is especially evident at our universities:

According to one report (I read), '[s]tudents are increasingly seeking help for, and apparently having emotional crises over, problems of everyday life. Recent examples mentioned included a student who [sought professional therapy to deal with the "trauma" she felt]...because her roommate had called her a "bitch," and two students who had sought counseling because they had seen a mouse in their off-campus apartment. The latter two also called the police, who kindly arrived and set a mousetrap for them.' [n.2]

Being accustomed to easy gratification, it appears, undermines our autonomy, our resilience, our creativity. Getting what we want *too readily* warps who we are - or certainly who we can be.

And in *Exodus*, it warps the Hebrews, twisting them, infantilising them. Rather than being innovative or self-reliant, they become "cry-babies." And don't forget: these men and women survived dreadful conditions of slavery. And not just "survived," *flourished* [Ex. 1:7,12]. They were tough. Hard. Capable people. Or at least they had been. But God's *repeated* acts of abundance creates an addiction in them for easy-living, which won't abide even fleeting moments of difficulty.

But difficulty is what we should expect to encounter: this life on earth was created to be 'very good'. That's God's judgement of it, which we hear being expressed in *Genesis* [1:31].

But "very good" is far short of "perfect" - of paradise, of "The Kingdom." And

so we should expect - and prepare for - hard times, especially as those aspiring to be disciples [Mt. 10:16-20], and especially as culture and society become less hospitable to our Faith and faithfulness.

The ultimate solution *is* Jesus' return [see, e.g.: Is. 2:4; Rev. 21:4], yes, but until then we mustn't sit on our hands, waiting - *impatiently* - for that, when there is so much that we can do ourselves with a little ingenuity and a lot of "heart" - characteristics that God Himself has endowed us with [Gen. 1:26] and must have done so for a purpose. Most injustice, after all, *most suffering*, is avoidable, *human-caused* injustice and suffering: conditions and situations that I myself may be responsible for, even if only in subtle, modest ways.

And if I can make a difference, what's stopping me from doing so?

Let's take a moment to pause and reflect.

Footnotes:

1. <http://www.chronicle.com/article/An-Epidemic-of-Anguish/232721/>
2. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201509/declining-student-resilience-serious-problem-colleges>
- 3.