

Water
Exodus 17:1-7
Amos 5:24

Brief Overview of Exodus

The book of Exodus tells the story of God choosing Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt through a desert wilderness toward the land of Canaan where they will finally settle as free people. Along the way, they encounter their divine liberator Yahweh at Mt. Sinai (also called Mt. Horeb) who establishes a covenant (a treaty) with the Israelites. The latter chapters of the book give the details of that treaty, offer a blueprint for the sacred tent where the Israelites and their priestly representatives will meet with Yahweh while they're wandering around in the desert, and describe some of the feasts they will celebrate as part of the covenant they agreed to. The book ends while they're still in the desert, before they reach their final destination.

Suggested materials

- small towel or piece of cloth
- bowl of water or small water fountain
- small smooth stones to place in or around the water bowl or fountain
- white board or newsprint and markers for notes
- you might download and print a picture of Congolese children and/or adult church partners from the Global Ministries website to symbolize our spiritual presence to one another in Christ, though we're physically separated by an ocean. Or you can use this one:



Preparation

- arrange bowl/fountain and stones on the cloth in an accessible, visible location
- with the group, pray your own prayer or the following:

We acknowledge your presence, O God, Fountain of Life, and pray that we may experience your power in our midst as we reflect together on this story and on the mission you call us to engage in the world. Cleanse us in the healing mist of your love. Give us a heart for justice and a longing for truth. In the name of Jesus, our living water. Amen.

Hearing the story

Read Exodus 17:1-7 aloud.

Discussion

As a group or in small groups discuss the following:

Where does this story take place?

Where does it fit in the overall narrative arc of Exodus — is it before or after their final escape from Egypt? Is it before or after they meet Yahweh at Mt. Sinai/Horeb? Characterize their situation in terms of their freedom and security.

Who are the characters in the story?

What's the problem?

Describe the emotional state of the various characters as the story progresses.

Are the people being reasonable? Why (not)?

Is Moses mad?

Is God mad?

Do the people get what they asked for?

In v 7, they name the place this happened, “Massa” and “Meribah.” What do those words mean? What does v 7 say the people were really asking about when they “quarreled and tested” God?

Judging from this story, is it ever OK to complain to God? If so, when?

Can you think of examples where a voiced complaint, an expression of pain, a cry for justice has prompted a positive response?

Read or summarize the following commentary:

When complaining is good and when it's not

Today's passage tells the second story of the section of Exodus that's set in the wilderness just after Israel has successfully fled slavery in Egypt. Scholars have sometimes referred to this genre of stories as the “murmuring tradition,” because in these stories, the Israelites complain to Moses about the harsh conditions they endure on their journey toward economic security in the land of Canaan.

In most cases, the people's grumbling against their leadership is cast in a negative light. It's read as a sign of ingratitude and faithless fear. But the judgment is harsher in some versions of the tradition than in others. And in some cases, complaining is celebrated.

The manna and quail story that immediately precedes today's story is a good example. In Exodus 16, immediately after Israel's miraculous escape at the Sea (Exodus 14-15), the people complain to Moses and Aaron about the shortage of food: “If only we had died at YHWH's hand in the land of Egypt while

we sat by the meat-pot, while we ate our fill of bread. Instead, you two have brought us out to this wilderness to kill this whole crowd by starvation!” (16:3). They are expressing the dilemma of people everywhere who feel trapped in abusive relationships and oppressive conditions because they fear that freedom might be worse: if I flee the abuse, will I have a roof over my head? Will I starve? How will my children survive?

Moses has led the people out of bondage into a desert that seems hostile to human life. “What good is freedom,” they ask, “if we’re all going to die of hunger?” They complain to Moses, and Moses complains to God who responds with a gift, a test, and a lesson. God gives the people bread to eat. It miraculously covers the ground each morning. They give the bread the comic name “manna” from the Hebrew words *man hû* (“what’s that stuff?”). God tells Moses that manna will be a test: will the people actually pay attention and do what God tells them to do?

Spoiler alert: they don’t.

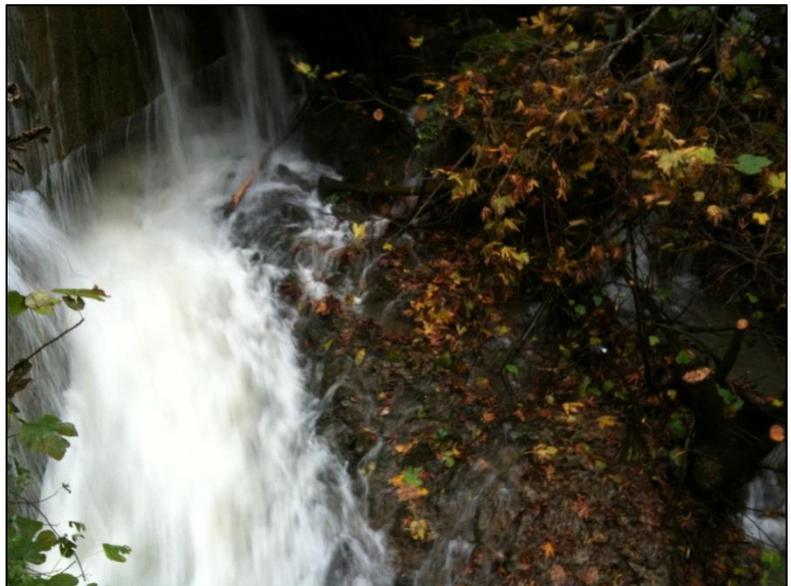
God tells them not to hoard the food, because it will rot if they do. They hoard food. God tells them to gather twice as much as they need on Friday, because there will be no manna on Saturday, which God says is a “holy sabbath” set aside for rest (v 23). On Saturday morning, a bunch of them are up bright and early, looking for manna. The people fail the test but learn the lesson to listen to God, trust God, and observe sabbath.

A couple of things are worth remembering for our reflection on today’s story about water from the cliff-rock in Exodus 17.

First, manna has a peculiar feature. “Some gathered more, and some gathered less,” we’re told, “but when they measured it with an omer (an ancient measuring device), the ones who gathered more had no excess and the ones who gathered less didn’t come up short. Each took exactly what she or he needed” (v 18).

When God’s rules govern the food supply, everyone gets what they need. Though people have different strengths, abilities, and talents, everyone gets enough to live, and no one squirrels away an excess. Sabbath, tied so closely

here to the miraculous provision of manna, is a weekly witness to God’s economic rules and a reminder to the people to play by them. (Note: Jesus makes explicit reference to all of this in the opening words of the prayer he gives his disciples as a model for them to pray: “may your sovereign rule apply on earth as it already does in heaven. Give us today our daily bread” — or the Greek word here might mean, “tomorrow’s bread,” as in the sixth day extra portion for seventh day sabbath.)



Second, the manna story is paired with a very scaled-down version of the quail story, which appears almost as an after-thought in a chapter otherwise focused completely on manna and sabbath. In v 8, Moses says Yahweh will give the people “meat to eat in the evening and bread in the morning,” a promise affirmed in a direct speech by Yahweh in v 12. In v 13, we’re told that “in the evening, quails flew up and covered the camp.” Quails are not mentioned again in the story.

A much more in-depth account of the quails in Numbers 11 casts the story in a much more negative light. The Numbers version emphasizes Yahweh’s anger at the Israelites’ complaint. There, quails are not miraculous provision of food as much as they’re curse: “When the people were crying out ‘evil!’ in ear-shot of Yahweh, Yahweh heard and got really mad. Yahweh’s fire burned them and consumed the outer-lying areas of the camp” (11:1). A lot of people died. Egged on by the “rabble” in the camp, the Israelites continue to cry, “if only we had meat to eat!” (v 4). “We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for free, and the cucumbers, the watermelons, the herbs, the onions, and the garlic! But now our life is all dried up! There’s nothing but this manna for us to look at!” (vv 5-6).

God’s provision of manna, a food supply that operates by God’s rules where no one has too little and no one has excess, is not good enough. The people want more.

Yahweh is angry, but Moses is beside himself: “why have you put the burden of this whole people on me?” he cries to God. “Am I the one who got pregnant with all this people? Am I the one who gave it birth that you should say to me, ‘You lift them to your breast like a nurse carries a nursing child’ all the way to the land that you (God) swore to give their fathers!” (v 12). “If this is how you’re going to treat me, just kill me now!” (v 15).



Yahweh responds to Moses’ rant by telling him to chill out and delegate. Seventy elders are appointed and

equipped to help Moses take care of the people. Problem solved. But Yahweh is still mad. He tells Moses to tell the people that, because they complained about how much better they had it as slaves in Egypt, “Yahweh will give you meat and you’ll eat alright! You’ll eat, not just one day or two days or five or ten or twenty days, but a month of days, until it’s coming out your nostrils and making you sick!” (vv 18-20).

God blows a massive flock of quails into the camp from the Mediterranean Sea. The birds fall out of the sky, covering the camp three-feet deep, a day’s journey in every direction. People work day and night for two full days to pick up the all the carcasses. The least anyone gathered was a bit more than 60 bushels of dead birds. But while they’re still trying to eat through this sudden glut of fowl, Yahweh gets mad all over again and gives them food poisoning so severe that great numbers of them die (vv 31-33).

In Exodus, the quails are gift. In Numbers, they are curse. In Exodus, God gives quails and manna “so you will know that I am Yahweh your God” (v 12). The miraculous provision of food is a sign of God’s solidarity with the people, an assurance of God’s presence and care. In Numbers, God gives the people so much meat that it poisons them. Meat is punishment for their ingratitude, their nostalgia for the “good old days” when they were slaves.

Both versions of the story critique excessive accumulation of wealth. In Exodus, the very nature of the food supply under God’s rules guarantees food security for all: no one goes hungry and no one is allowed to hoard. You can’t always get what you want. But in an economy that runs by God’s rules, everybody gets what they need.

In Numbers, the people are punished for crying out. But in Exodus, they are rewarded. God hears their cry and responds. This, in fact, has been the case from the beginning of the exodus story. In Exod 2:23, the Israelites “groaned from their bondage and cried out. From their bondage, they cried to God for help.” God “heard their groaning, and remembered God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the Israelites and paid attention.” (v 24). Israel’s complaint prompts God’s rescue. The people’s expression of pain inspires God to act. Their cry for justice remind God to intervene. It motivates God’s saving work in the world. In the exodus story, God’s true identity is revealed in God’s liberating response to the outcry of the oppressed — God’s bold, decisive action to break the chains of imperial bondage and give the vulnerable poor what they need to survive.

In our story today, the people continue to travel through the wilderness in the vicinity of Mt. Sinai. They pitch camp at Rephidim where there is no water to drink. Water, like the food of chapter 16, is essential for survival. The people start arguing with Moses to give them water to drink. Moses pushes back: “Why are you arguing with me and testing Yahweh?” (v 2). But they continue to complain: “Why did you bring us up from Egypt just to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?” (v 3). Moses cries out to Yahweh, “What am I supposed to do for this people? They’re just a little way from stoning me to death!” (v 4). Yahweh tells Moses to take the elders of Israel with him and cross in front of the people, to stretch out his staff — the same one he used to turn the Nile into blood back in Exodus 7 — and head out to meet Yahweh who will be standing in front of Moses at the cliff of Horeb. Then, God says, when Moses strikes the cliff-rock, water will shoot out of it, and the people will be able to drink. Moses does as he’s told, and water gushes out of the rock, just as Yahweh said it would (v 6).

They name the place “Massah” (trial) and “Meribah” (argument) because the Israelites argued and tried Yahweh, asking, “Is Yahweh really in our midst or not?” (v 7). What’s really at stake in their cry for help, this final verse implies, is the abiding presence of God. Their thirst for drinkable water poses a deeply theological question: is God actually in our midst? Does God really stand in solidarity with us?

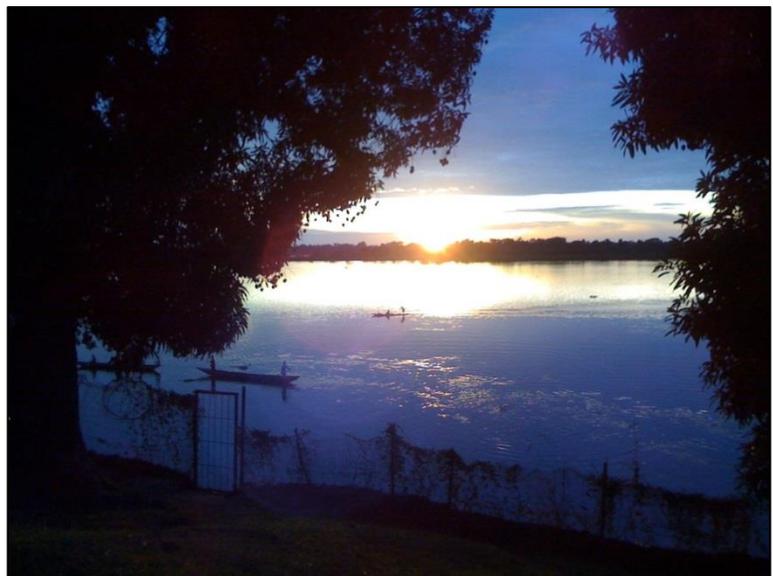
Moses is frightened by the intensity of the people’s complaint. As the uprising gains steam, he’s afraid for his life.

But unlike in the Numbers story of the quails, Yahweh is not angry. The people’s legitimate request for life-sustaining water to drink prompts God to respond. God answers the theological question of God’s presence and solidarity with a resounding, “Yes!” The people’s complaint prompts a theophany — a clear vision of God — and a life-saving miracle — a gushing river of water from the side of the mountain.

The cry for justice, the people's demand that the basic necessities of life be met has the power to clarify, to bring God into focus, to help us experience the presence of God when we otherwise find it hard to perceive.

Amos sheds light on God's gracious response to the people's cry for life-saving water in Exodus 17. In Amos 5, the prophet condemns religious people who are economically secure for their cold-hearted disregard of the suffering of the poor and vulnerable. Speaking as the messenger of God, he condemns the pious worship of the well-to-do and calls them to justice and right-relationships with those who don't have enough food to eat and clean water to drink. He compares the social-economic order God desires to gushing water, to refreshing streams that never run dry: "let justice roll down like waters, and right-relatedness like an endlessly gushing stream!"

Water is a powerful force in the daily lives of the Congolese people. The Congo River is their transportation lifeline. It's a source of food and of livelihood. Its waters nurture farms and support one of the world's last remaining giant rain forests. This forest is one of the great lungs of the earth, absorbing and transforming toxins into breathable air for people around the world. The quality of the air we breathe depends on the health and vitality of this forest and the river that sustains it. The protection of this great source of life on our planet is, of course, the duty of all of humanity; but it is the special calling of the peoples — among them, our sisters and brothers in



the Disciples Community in Congo — who live along the banks of this great river. Unfortunately, decades of Cold War-created dictatorship, followed by more than a decade of civil war that very quickly morphed into an international war, a scramble for valuable natural resources that drew regular and irregular armies from nations throughout central Africa, have left the country devastated. Almost 6 million people have died as a result of the war, directly through combat and the deliberate targeting of civilians, and indirectly, through the disease and starvation that have spread dramatically in the chaos of war. Infrastructure has been destroyed, social services have been decimated, and the economy has been devastated, though Congo has one of the largest and most significant stores of important mineral resources on earth. Social, political, and economic devastation have dramatically reduced the store of safe drinking water and limited the ability of people to access it. Still, our Christian partners in Congo, supported by our giving to Global Ministries, are engaged in life-giving projects to bring safe drinking water to people throughout the Congo basin.

Hunger, violence, and lack of access to clean water pose a deeply theological question for people who claim to be a people of God. Today's biblical narrative responds to the question posed by the complaint of Israelites deprived of drinkable water: Yes! God, in fact, dwells with those who suffer.

God stands in solidarity with those who cry out for justice. "I am your God!" God proclaims. The theological question for us is whether we will stand with God. And if so, what that calls us to do.

Questions for further discussion and thought:

In some situations, victims of oppression and abuse risk their lives for complaining. Many may choose to keep quiet. What is our responsibility in such cases?

Safe drinking water, like food, is essential for life. Yahweh doesn't begrudge people's complaint that their basic needs aren't being met. But God is angered by greed, by a desire for excess. In the case of water in Congo, what should be complained about? Which behavior should be condemned? What should be encouraged?

What should we, in our congregation do? What should I do?

Close with your own prayer or with the following:

Hear us, O God who brings life-giving water in the desert from the rock face of a cliff! You never cease to amaze! Give us the strength to get angry, the courage to complain about injustice, to speak the truth and not shut up. Give us the strength to walk the difficult path of justice and peace, to build with you the world you dream for us. We pray especially for our sisters and brothers in Congo, for their safety, for tables that are full, and sturdy shelter, for clean water for them to drink, for a mighty river highway unimpeded by the violence of war and social collapse, for a clean and healthy river, a vibrant forest, the earth's lungs, inhaling, cleansing, and releasing again pure air, the animating breath of all life. Give us strength for the long journey toward justice that lies ahead. Give us the courage and endurance of love. In the name of the Way, the Truth, the Life. Amen.

For the complete bible study series please visit
www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html.