

“God at Work” New London UMC World Communion, Oct. 1 & 2, 2023
Exodus 17:1-7 *Message*; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13 *NRSV* Rev. Joyce Rich

We take these quick, little, dips into the Book of Exodus each week and then forget how mind-numbingly repetitive life was like for everyone who was on this Exodus journey – because it just went on, and on, and on, and on, and on; day after day after day after day; week after week after week; month after month after month; year after year after year. So, yes, the people did become creatures of habit living this way. And one of their habits was to complain when they were especially stressed out. And, yes, that’s what they did in last week’s reading when they complained to Moses and Aaron about being led out into the wilderness to starve to death – when they could have had all they wanted to eat back in Egypt! But God heard their complaints and responded to them. In this week’s passage, the people found there was absolutely no water to drink where they set up camp in Rephidim. So they laid into Moses once again, “Give us water to drink! Why did you take us from Egypt and drag us out here with our children and animals to die of thirst?” And Moses responded to them by saying, “Why pester me? Why are you testing God?”

Well, we’re pretty sure that we KNOW why they pestered Moses: Moses was standing right there in front of them! Moses was the one who led them out of Egypt. Moses was in charge of this camp, and if Moses knew what was good for him, he would get moving on finding some water for everybody AND their animals. The clock was ticking, and the longer it took for Moses to find water, the more blame and complaints would be heaped on Moses. . . . I must say that at times like this I get the impression that Aaron is just pointing at Moses and saying, “Hey! I can’t help you. You’ll have to take it up with him.”

Of course we would expect Moses to have immediately taken their complaints to God. But Moses *did not* take up the matter of the people’s physical thirst with God. Moses actually *failed* to mention to God that the people were angry because there was no water to drink! Instead, Moses told God that the people were so difficult he didn’t know what to do with them, and he was afraid they were on the verge of killing him. . . . In short, Moses only talked to God about Moses. . . . But God heard what was the real problem: the people didn’t believe God was with them. In response to their lack of faith, God would be present and at work through Moses to strike the rock at Horeb to release the water that was under the rock. The water was already there – just like God was already there with them. God provided for them – yet again – because that was what God had done repeatedly day after day with manna; and with a pillar of cloud to provide shade for them during the day, and light at night. . . . So why would the people test God by asking, “Is GOD here with us, or not?” Why would the people think they could push God around to do what they wanted God to do, when they wanted God to do it? Were they only willing to believe in a God who was there for them, to act like an “on demand” dispenser of what they desired? Would you say that was the same thing as believing that God was *only* there to provide ready response to them?

We might think that the Israelites had a warped understanding of who God is, and what God is about. But sometimes our own words and actions can be pretty similar. For example, if we pray for God to do something we want God to do – do we EXPECT God to do it? Do we believe that God WANTS to do this for US? . . . And what if (heaven forbid) God does NOT respond to our prayers the way we want God to? Do we feel like God has FAILED us? Are we flabbergasted or angry that God would IGNORE our prayers – our requests – our demands? Is that how it is? Then perhaps we have totally lost track of what it means to be IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?! Because a healthy relationship cannot flow perpetually in one direction. And perhaps you've heard this before: God is **not** a vending machine. And my friends, we are NOT in relationship with a vending machine, we are in relationship WITH the LIVING GOD. And we understand ourselves to be children of the Living God. And as such we live with God and listen to God, just as God lives with us and listens to us. We do this because we love one another, and we care about one another. And this mutually loving relationship is very different from only caring about what we want, and getting God to do what we want.

The apostle Paul picks up on this difference in his letter to the Philippians where he encourages them to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.” To instead be humble. To look not to their own interests, but to the interests of others. To think and act like Christ Jesus, having the same love, being in full accord. Through this kind of sharing together as we live this life together, we demonstrate that it is God who is at work in us, enabling us to will and to *want* to work together. And to top it all off: this unified life together brings both God and us joy.

Now I know it can sound a little “mind-meld-ish” to say that we can be of “the same mind” with each other and with Christ. But I think we already know what it's like to say something, and then have somebody else say, “That is EXACTLY what I was thinking!” And then have our ideas feed off of one and another, as we finish each other's sentences. Our minds can be so in synch with each other that it can feel like we practically share the same mind. There is nothing stopping us from having that same kind of connection with the mind of Christ. If we want it, we can have that same sense of bonding with Christ. Obviously today we have the opportunity to connect with Christ in holy communion as we eat, drink, and remember – engaging our bodies, minds, and spirits in full accord. Thanks be to God!

Amen.