

Again and again the Israelites complain about the wilderness – They quarreled with Moses and tested God. **Massah, means testing, and Meribah means quarreling.**

There is another account in the Bible about this place in Numbers 20. Some textual scholars regard the two accounts as different versions of the same events at Meribah and Massah. Or perhaps in their wandering the wilderness they came back around and the people said, “Not his place again!” We’re not quite sure, the writers didn’t date their entries back then.

As I read to you the episode recounted by the Book of Numbers – pay attention that it features the Israelites quarreling with Moses and Aaron about the lack of water and food crops for their flocks; the text then states that Moses and Aaron responded by consulting Yahweh at the Tabernacle door, while prostrating themselves, and that Yahweh told them to take the rod, and *speak* to a particular rock while the people are gathered together in view of it. The narrative continues with Moses following the instructions to take Aaron's staff and to gather the Israelites, but instead of speaking to the rock, which Yahweh had stated would result in water flowing from it, **Moses speaks to the crowd and strikes the rock, doing so twice**, resulting in a strong flow of water. As if saying “You, YOU want water – HERE HAVE SOME WATER!”

Numbers 20:1-13 (NIV)

20:1 In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.

2 Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. 3 They quarreled with Moses and said, “If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! 4 Why did you bring the Lord’s community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? 5 Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!”

6 Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. 7 The Lord said to Moses, 8 “Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.”

9 So Moses took the staff from the Lord’s presence, just as he commanded him. 10 He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, “**Listen, you rebels**, must we bring you water out of this rock?” 11 Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

12 But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.” 13 These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and where he was proved holy among them.

Remember the Psalm – “We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.” (78:4)

Teach your children. This is not the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures where we are told to teach the stories about our walk with God, but it is a good reminder. This faith thing is something to be passed on. Often, we assume that they’ll pick it up when they are ready. Like a habit, or a belief system. When in fact, it is a way of life. And it isn’t really caught; it is taught. It is lived. It is taught by those as they are living it. “So that they should set their hope in God.” Because they were taught by those who have set their hope in God. They have seen it and they have heard it, so now they will step into the place too—in part by remembering the things that God has done.

The Exodus passage is a continuation of the God’s care of the people as they wander through the wilderness. On the surface, it is a simple story of need recognized and then met. But upon deeper reflection it is a unique opportunity to teach about faith and unfaith. Both of the people and of Moses.

1st – the people.

What if people say they will only believe in a God who satisfies their needs. Did you ever notice in the larger story how no one seems to come to Moses and say, “Can we talk?” There is no assessment of needs, no petition to explore possibilities, no delegation to solve the problem. What there is, is whining and complaining. And casting doubt on the leader. “Why did you bring us here to die?” Is anyone else amazed that this current crisis (like previous crises) causes the pilgrims to remember slavery fondly? What they left behind looks better from this “thirsty” distance. Granted, the need for water is critical to survival. But there seems to be a quick rejection of the one who has brought them safe thus far.

Yes, the people got water, but where is the celebration? Where is the worship? Where is the dancing before the rock spewing clean water for them to drink? When the transaction between God and God’s people becomes so utilitarian, what gets left out is joy, and gratitude, and worship. What gets left out is everything that matters in a life worth living.

2nd – Moses

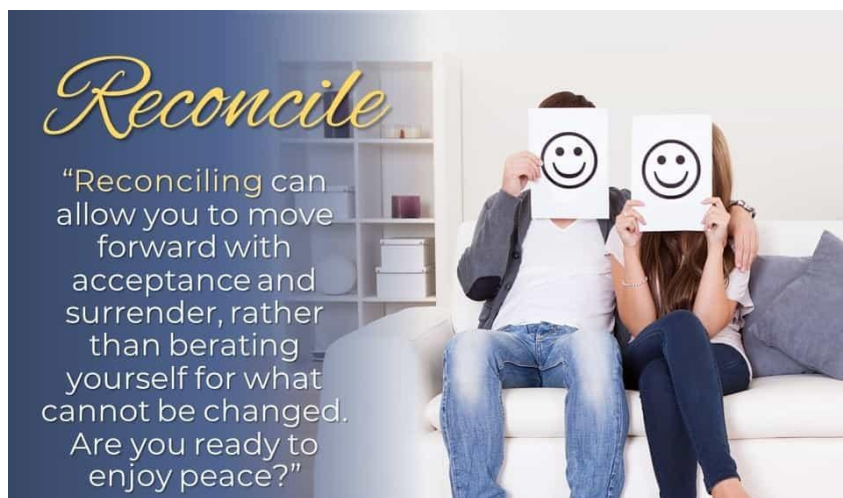
We are unsure if the Numbers 20 and Exodus 17 scriptures are separate events or the same event. In the Exodus 17 event Moses was told to strike the rock to produce water - and the narration simply says, “Moses did so.” In the Numbers 20 event, Moses told to speak to the rock in the presence of all the people – instead he speaks to the crowd and strikes the rock, doing so twice, resulting in a strong flow of water. Not a good way to exemplify obedience. Moses at one point says that to complain to him is to test God. That’s a dangerous correlation to make. And then when he does go to God, he doesn’t bring the people’s need but his own fear. “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” And oh, by the way, they’re thirsty. Maybe he knows that God is already aware of the need; he just wants to save his own skin.

“Do you want to survive, or do you want to truly live?” Go back to the beginning scripture. A maskil is inviting us to not only get what we need from God, but to think about how we want to live as God’s people. We can strike the rock, if that is what we are told to do and complete the minimum for God. Or, worse, we can strike the rock out of anger when we are not told to do something else. Moses found out that his attitude rescinded his entry into the promised land.

The third option is to strike or not to strike when we are told AND engender the full experience and fullness of God’s grace, the abundance of God’s providence, the joy of God’s salvation. This means having the conversations with those you are doing ministry for, taking the time to celebrate successes and learnings. Wouldn’t it be great to have a ritual in our culture when someone humbles themselves - admitting they wronged another and the two parties tell the story and reconcile rather than avoid each other until the memory of it goes away.

Truly living for God means putting ourselves after God and after others: even in the wilderness. There is a better way than Massah and Meribah to handle our complaints and more to life than whether to strike or not to strike.

~Preached by Rev. Peter Paige at Bryan Wesley UMC 9/27/2020



Reconcile

“Reconciling can allow you to move forward with acceptance and surrender, rather than berating yourself for what cannot be changed. Are you ready to enjoy peace?”