

The Rock Fountain

Psalm 95

Sundays in Lent: God Answers Life's Questions

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Sunday, February 24, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

The Rock Fountain Psalm 95:1-11 Exodus 17:1-7 Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle February 24, 2008

What happens to people if they don't drink from the Fountain of God? Psalm 95 tells us. The psalm begins wonderfully, and it ends badly. Let us pray. O Lord, today in worship we begin with a joyful noise. As you send us out from here, when we hear your Word, may you give us the power of your Spirit to live it out – that our hearts might be changed, and our life might be transformed, according to the way of Jesus, who is the Rock of our salvation and the Living Water. Amen.

The psalm begins wonderfully: "O come, let us sing to the Lord. Let us make a joyful noise to the Rock of our salvation." But it ends with difficult words: "For forty years, [God said] I loathed that generation" and he said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways." Therefore, in my anger, I swore, "They shall not enter my rest." A tough ending for a great worship service: from singing to loathing; from joyful noise to hardened hearts. What happens here between the joy of our worship and the judgment of God at the end?

As we see in Exodus 17, the trouble bubbled up in a non-descript place, out in the middle of nowhere, when the people of God complained about not having enough water. They complained against Moses about water being too bitter, at one time; God gave them sweet water. They complained against Moses about not having enough food; and God gave them manna. They quarreled with Moses and complained to him because they had no water; God gave them a spring of water out of the very rock of Mount Horeb. The people had come out of slavery and a long pattern of complaint; and many refused to change while they were wandering in the wilderness— even for forty years. Complaint and quarreling were learned habits of their slavery. Moses called that desert place near Horeb, "Massah" and "Meribah": 'quarreling' and 'testing.' They quarreled with Moses and they tested God. The people made it clear to Moses that they would rather have the food that they had in Egypt than the daily unknown as free people in the wilderness.

Hard times can produce hard people. We can see the wilderness as a desert, where we are forced to drink of bitterness... or an oasis where we are invited to drink of God's betterment. My dad loved the teachings of an itinerant apostle by the name of John Wright Follette. He wrote a book, *Bread Upon the Waters*, and in that, there was a chapter called, "Bitter or Better." I will never forget his simple teaching: you can become bitter or better; it has to do with the letter "I." "I am going to do it my way" ... "I will assert my own opinion" ... "I will determine my own destiny" ... "I will complain to whomever I want." And Follette's point was: if you live into "I," there is only one destiny you have, and that's bitterness. The pain of life can tempt me to believe that I know what is best... I know what is wrong... I know who is to blame, thereby driving me to turn against you, and to turn against God.

My question for you today is: How are you responding to the hardship of life? Are you hardening or softening in the face of difficult times? Are you complaining more and enjoying less? Are you bitter? Or are you better? What happens when you don't get what you want, or don't get what you think you deserve? What happens when you are disappointed?... When your expectations are not met?... When your hopes are dashed?... When your hungers are not fed, and when your thirsts are not quenched? What happens to you when you've seen God meet your need in the past, and at this time God is not working it out the way that you had hoped? Have you become a person of complaint, quarreling and blame? Do you beat up on someone you love or admire? Do you lash out? Do you strike a blow for your anger in words, or tone, or act? Moses called such people "Massah" – 'complainers' or 'quarrelsome.' God calls those people "Meribah" – 'testy'— people who are impatient and easily-irritated when God doesn't give them what they want, or when they want it. They put God to the test; and God doesn't like it one bit.

And what is the root of complaint and quarreling? I give you one word: fear. Fear that God is not present. Fear that God is not good. Fear that God will not provide. Fear that we will not have enough. Fear that we will, in fact, perish; and we will die. In our fear, we tend to do damage. In our fear, we blame. In our fear, we try to retreat to a romanticized past – 'the good ole' days.' In our fear, we reduce and deny God. In our fear, we accent scarcity and we devalue generosity. In our fear, we give-in to reactive instincts. We become reptilian and small-minded. We become defensive and aggressive. In our fear, we quarrel and complain. In our fear, we forget how God has helped us in the past. In our fear, we are deeply afraid that God has abandoned us. In our fear, we are suspicious that God has set us up for failure, or that God is really out to get us. In our fear we abandon faith and we use force. We turn on one another. We allow our dark sides to take over. We react, rather than respond. We allow our basic instincts to control us. In our fear, we turn on the very people we love, and the very God we trust— the very leaders who show us a better way.

Not too long ago, I was talking with a woman who was anxious about money. She loved her husband but she blamed him and often attacked him for being an inadequate provider. She quarreled with him and complained to me about him. I asked her why she didn't complain to God? "Oh," she said, "I could never do that. That's blasphemous." There is a right way to deal with our fear and to make complaint. Mature love drives away fear. There is a right way to complain, and there are many wrong ways to do it. The right place to go, when we are afraid, is to place ourselves in the presence of our Loving God. The right place to go with complaint is to complain to God. God can handle all complaints.

There is an ancient spiritual discipline of complaint: right before Psalm 95, we read, in Psalm 94, a 'Psalm of Complaint.' According to Reformed scholar, Walter Bruggemann, Psalm 94 is a psalm of disorientation: a recognition that things are not right... something is terribly wrong... and someone needs to do something about it. But Psalm 95 (the one that we have read this morning) is a psalm of re-orientation: and that is, that if we believe that God can make things right, then our life will be turned around. In the prayer disciplines of the psalms, particularly used during this time of Lent, before we get to the bad ending of Psalm 95 (describing what

happens to hard people) God's grace gives us another way out—out of the slavery of complaint, and quarreling, and hardness. The spiritual discipline of complaint is fairly simple:

If you have a bone to pick with God, don't take it out on the people around you. Take it out on God.

That sounds like heresy or blasphemy to some: "Take it out on God? Doesn't God get even... or angry... if we do that?" NO. In fact, God expects it. God can handle it. We must tell God and not beat up on our neighbors. God would rather have you hit the Rock of your salvation than blame the people who just happen to get in your way.

We can tell, when we drive in Washington, DC and other parts of the country, what happens when people get angry and bitter on the road. And you'd better stay out of their way! I'm sure they're not intending to do harm, but they are so wrapped up in their bitterness that they could do damage. Psalm 94, in complaint, says some angry things. If you are in the car that's been driven off the road, this is your psalm: "You, God of vengeance, shine forth!" "Give to the proud what they deserve!" "O Lord, how long shall the wicked exalt?" Or another way of saying it: 'Lord, get that bad driver.'

When we are afraid and angry, God wants us to complain to God—not to one another. It is not complaining to God that angers God; it is when we attack one another and wear each other out with quarrel and complaining. God is not pleased that Israel wants to clobber Moses when there is no food or water. What God wants Israel to do is to cry out to God—not to Moses. If we have to blame someone for our fix, let's blame God. Let's cry out to God, who can intervene and make it right. We human beings can't handle the stress of all those complaints without it taking a toll on us, and others. But God can. God can take the hits... God can weather the storms... God can hear the complaints... God can receive the criticism. 'Complain to God' is the simplicity of the spiritual discipline; don't beat up on one another. If there is trouble, cry out to God; God will answer. And, as Doug Learned said last week in his sermon, "help" is the prayer that works; and "help" is addressed to God.

How does Moses handle complaints of the people? He cries out to God for help. Moses' response to their constant complaint was to cry out to the Lord: "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." And the Rock of their salvation responds to Moses graciously and kindly, saying:

Go out ahead of the people. Take some of the elders with you. Take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. And I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come pouring out of it, so that the people may drink.

Notice all the dense language about stones and rocks here? It's a frequent pattern to find irony and word play, as humor, in the book of Exodus: the people are ready to stone Moses; God will stand on the rock at Horeb; and Moses is to hit the rock for the water to come out. Now this is very clear: God wants the people to drink water that he pours out of the Rock. In addition, Psalm 95 wordplays on an irony and humor, with a grand Hebrew pun taken from Exodus 17— calling God the "Rock of our salvation." Why go to a Hard Rock Café when you can live out Exodus 17 and Psalm 95 yourself? God doesn't want us to 'rock and roll' with each other when we're angry; God wants us to take our best shots at God. When it comes to handling complaints, God is rock solid. God wants to help us to come to trust that he is the Rock of our salvation. If you want to complain to someone because you are thirsty and tired, complain to the Rock of your salvation. Even Jesus used the discipline of complaint at the cross; he quoted one of the Psalms: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" But you notice that he does not complain to his enemies, or quarrel with his disciples; he prays for them and forgives them.

There is a terrible danger in locking-in to a life pattern of complaint toward one another: even if God sends us the resources that we often need, we have developed such a long-term pattern of complaint, that we'll never be satisfied. And this was the problem of the people in the wilderness for 40 years. It's not the physical water that really satisfies. It's not the resource... or the thing... or the human who satisfies. It is the Rock of our salvation who satisfies. And the people could never come to grips with that.

If you want to quarrel with someone to get what you need, quarrel with the Rock of your Salvation. Kneel before the Lord, your Maker, and allow the Rock to soften your heart. As Jesus said to the woman drawing water at the well, "If you knew to whom you were talking, you would ask him for Living Water and he would give it to you." She discovered she was in the presence of the Fountain, who is the Rock... and the Rock, who is the Fountain. We, too often, ask for the kind of water that satisfies us just for a moment—when God wants to give us the One who satisfies us, and our soul, for eternity.

Are you drinking personally of the Rock of your salvation today? If you are not, the temptation of turning to behavior that hurts others is very possible. But the good news is that the Rock of your salvation is right here. It is Jesus; he is the living water. He is the only source that will give us water that will quench our thirst forever. His love is flowing. His forgiveness is pouring out. All we have to do is reach out and take a drink. Let us not develop the reputation of being loathsome to God for 40 years, as we age and die. Let us come to the Living Waters, every one of that's thirsty. Let us come into the restful flow of God's kind presence and soft heart, lest we, in the hardness of our own hearts, continue to complain and quarrel with each other. Don't end life badly. Don't go out in a blaze of complaint and bitterness. Hear the words of Jesus, the Living Water: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and heavily-burdened, and I will give you rest."

As Thomas a Kempis said, in his personal devotional writing, *The Imitation of Christ*, taking the perspective of Christ, he said:

If you seek solutions in yourself for any matter, immediately you will fail within yourself and you will grow barren. From me [quoting Christ], the humble and great, the poor and the rich, draw water as a living fountain... But he who seeks glory apart from me... shall not be established in true joy, nor shall be enlarged in heart, but shall be greatly hindered and thrown into tribulation. Rejoice in Me, alone, for there is none good, but One. And that is God.

Come to the Living Water—in Jesus Christ—to assuage your thirst. It is only in drinking the water of the Rock that you will find rest

for your soul. Do so today and your life will not end badly, but gladly. Let us pray. O, Lord Jesus Christ, we want to drink deeply and longingly at your well, so that our lives can be fruitful in the midst of desert places. So now, empower us with your love and grace, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.