



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

Thanksgiving

November 28, 2019

“Massah & Meribah; Testing & Quarreling”

(Exodus 17:7)

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“And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (Ex. 17:7)

Collect: Almighty God, Your mercies are new every morning and You graciously provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your goodness, give thanks for Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience all our days; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Out there in the middle of the desert, they are annoyed by their hardships. They are thirsty, impatient, doubting, fearful, paranoid, and so very angry. Some even want to stone Moses. Others are talking about returning to Egypt, where at least they had food and water in their bellies and a familiar routine and guaranteed employment. (That's what memory often does . . . it scrubs up the old days and makes them look better than they were. I suppose there's grace in that, but it might also make us lazy and complacent in returning thanks to God for present blessings. How can we appreciate and give thanks for the blessings of this day if we're always comparing the reality of the present to the airbrushed memory of the past.)

The Jews have forgotten the details of their oppression: slavery, whips, bricks without straw, no one to turn to. Worse, they have forgotten the facts of their liberation. They have forgotten how wonderfully they were led out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. They have forgotten their charismatic leader, Moses, and his great service to them; and they have forgotten God and his promises to sustain them.

We cannot say they had forgotten the psalm [Psalm 136] that we read earlier, only because the psalm had not yet been written. They didn't have opportunity to forget it. But they also didn't have opportunity to revel in the cadence of that psalm, to revel in the litany of blessings followed by the ongoing refrain and promise: "His steadfast love endures forever." That refrain emphasizes that God's grace is manifest in all his works in the past, and will continue to be manifest in the future. So we cannot blame them for forgetting the psalm. But I wonder if it might have been different for those grumps at Massah and Meribah if they had had the benefit of this responsive psalm. I wonder if it might also be different for us if we rehearsed our salvation history with this psalm, if we were reminded again and again and again that "His steadfast love endures forever."

But that's not what they are saying. Instead they are asking, "Are you among us or not? Are you with us or not? If you are with us, don't just sit there: do something! Do it now! Don't just remind us of our glorious past or our bright future. We're thirsty here and now. What good are memory and hope if we die of thirst? What have you done for us lately?"

This is a low to mid-grade grumbling fever. . . an undercurrent of moaning and groaning, of complaining and kvetching, the sort of little irritants that make up the day, the week, the year, our lives. It's their deeply rooted, murmuring tradition, and, tragically, it's a tradition we've become part of, an unbroken line of ungrateful generations of people belonging to God. We, like them, vaguely remember the blessings of things long ago, and we long for great things to come, yet right now, in the present tense, we can get pretty annoyed, pretty irritated, pretty unsatisfied. We'll not go all in and risk public scrutiny by carefully articulating our concerns in a public forum. Instead, we'll mutter something just loud enough for a safe neighbor to hear. But God has good ears and he hears our grumbling.

It's a nasty little scene described here in Exodus, so very human, so very familiar. And God is not pleased. Putting a few words into his mouth: Did I go through all this trouble bringing you disagreeable ingrates out of bondage only to be treated like this? To be provoked, challenged, questioned as to my loyalty to you?"

He could have stirred up his wrath and wiped them out. Instead he chooses to be patient; he chooses to have mercy. He tells Moses to strike the rock at Horeb with the very rod with which he caused the waters of the Red Sea to part. Moses does so, and wonder of wonders, out comes cold, clean, water . . . more than they could ever drink. The people are sated and satisfied . . . for the moment. However, the passage ends on a sour note: "And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah— which in Hebrew means "testing" and "quarreling."

So what are we to make of this passage? What does it mean for us today? What are the take home points?

First this, do not test the Lord your God. Do not force God to give you constant evidence of his loyalty, power, and affection. You are not to test God; you are to trust God.

I always know the lights are going out on a marriage when one or the other needs constant evidence of loyalty and love. So also, in this marriage between God and his people. The love and trust are growing cold if we feel the need for additional evidence from God. I'd ask one simple question of you: Is the cross not enough evidence? What more does he need to do to prove to you his love and loyalty?

Massah and Meribah keep coming up in Scripture, because God doesn't ever want his people to behave like that again. He forgave his people for sure, but he also reminds them nearly a dozen times: Don't let Massah and Meribah ever happen again. Don't question his loyalty or love. Don't turn Watertown into a Massah or a Meribah! God is to be trusted in season and out, when we win or lose, whether we live or die. God is to be trusted, for he has already put his own life on the line in Jesus Christ. Don't put God to the test.

Second, remember. The people were so obsessed with their hardships that they forgot to remember the God who brought them out of Egypt in the first place, with the plagues and the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea. In their present distress, they forgot all of it. They forgot to remember the Lord would not bring them this far only to watch them die in the desert. That would be a wasted investment – all that trouble and annoyance for nothing.

Therefore, on this Thanksgiving I invite you not just to count your blessings. I invite you to remember and count the bad things too. Name them. List them. The terrible things, the worst things, the awful memories that still hurt and make you feel sad, angry, guilty, betrayed. Think of your worst moments: your sorrows, your losses, your sadness, your sin and its consequences; and then remember that you are here; God brought you through the worst days of your life. There may be yet a worse one in store for you, but that's for another day of thanksgiving. Today you can say you got through the trauma. You got through the trial. You endured the temptation. You survived the war. You weathered the toxic relationship. And it's because his mercy endures forever. He lifted you out of the slimy pit. He walked with you through the valley of the shadow of death. He washed you clean with his blood.

Remember who got you through. You probably got into the mess on your own steam, but it was the Lord who got you out of it. It was the Lord who was with you in the middle of it. There are more troubles to come; there will always in this life be more troubles; but remember how the Lord did a wonderful thing in bringing you through to this present moment. Thank him for it.

Remember not just the good things. Remember the bad things, and then look to see where you are.

Third, giving thanks is not just for a moment or a day. It's a way of life. Even when there are long parched periods where we are bone dry, without inner or outer strength, not knowing exactly where we are going or how we'll get there. During those periods we have to function sort of like the camel, living on what we've stored up. We have to draw on the goodness of the past in order to trust in the promises of the future. Keep moving through the parched land, and keep giving thanks, and sooner or later you'll come out of it. You'll be brought out of it into a good and verdant land. Till then, don't make the mistake of Massah and Meribah. Don't mistake a moment of hardship for the end of the world.

Finally, remember this. For the Israelites, water flowed from the rock. For you, blood flowed from Christ. For them, water satisfied them for a moment. The blood of Jesus satiates for eternity. The relief he gave them was a foretaste. The relief he gives us is the real deal.

Christ himself is the spiritual Rock, the Rock of salvation, from which gushes the Water of Life. Because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, our best days are ahead of us, not behind us. We are still in the wilderness of this world. We have not arrived at where we are meant to be. We have not crossed over into the Promised Land. As good as Watertown can be (and if that makes you snicker, if you doubt that, then you've become oblivious to how much of the rest of the world lives); so again, as good as Watertown can be, this is not our destination, this is not home, and for that we thank God. The Lord has not brought us this far . . . he did not die in agony on the cross only to abandon us now. That would be a wasted investment. All that trouble for nothing. No. As Paul writes, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave

him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? . . . Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“Is the Lord among us or not?” they asked. You can bet your lives he is, and his steadfast love endures forever. Thanks be to God! Amen.

