

Sermon Lent 3 A 2023

Moses threw the staff on the ground and it became a snake, and when he grabbed it by the tail it became a staff. God told Moses to take in his hand the staff with which he would perform the signs.

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. Say to him, “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, ‘Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.’ But until now you have not listened. Thus says the Lord, ‘By this you shall know that I am the Lord.’ See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood. The fish in the river shall die, the river itself shall stink, and the Egyptians shall be unable to drink water from the Nile.” ’ Exodus 7 :14-18

When Pharaoh finally relented after all the plagues brought on by that terrible staff and when he finally let the Israelites go, they fled into the desert. But then, Pharaoh changed his mind, and sent the warriors on chariots to chase after the Israelites, and backed them up against the sea. They were trapped. As they were crying out in fear and complaining about having left the security of their enslavement, the Lord said to Moses, “lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. ...Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided, and he Israelites went into the sea on dry ground.

They were free. But, freedom was hard. Everything about the journey was new and unfamiliar. Moving from place to place was hard. And when they were thirsty, that was the worst. The people complained against Moses and

said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'

So, God said to Moses, "take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink. But the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Good question. Is the Lord among us or not ? How does one know if the Lord is among us ? How does one know if God even cares, especially when we are faced with suffering ? The Israelites suffered as enslaved people. They had to get up when Pharaoh said, they had to go to bed when Pharaoh said, they had to eat what Pharaoh said. They had to do everything Pharaoh said. It was a life of hard labor and no freedom. So, when they were free and living in the desert, and when they were thirsty and hungry, they ended up with the crazy longing to return to where they at least had something to eat and drink.

We don't speak of our own suffering as "suffering" that often. When someone asks us how we are, we usually say, "Fine." We don't want to be overly dramatic. But, we all experience both physical and mental pain, and that is a definition of suffering. So, yes, we don't like to admit it, but we suffer, too. And suffering is always a test. It demands patience, and the humility to let others help us. Paul says that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

But suffering can also produce bitterness. It can seclude and ostracize. It can cast into the darkness of hopelessness and despair. It can lead to questions like, "If God loved me and even cared about me, how could God let me suffer like this?" And it can lead to the conclusion that God does not care and is not with us and does not love us.

As people of faith we are thirsty for God's love. We yearn for it with parched throats. Like the Israelites thirsting in the desert, we want to know that God is among us—that God cares. And when we are suffering we need more than ever to know that. So, what will be the sign that God loves and cares for us? How will we know?

Paul writes, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ...if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." For Paul right here in this passage to the Romans, the proof that God cares and that God loves us is not in a sign—not in some miracle-healing or other manifestation, but in the fact that Christ died for us. The proof of God's love isn't in some sign. It is in God and in how God lives in us in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus chose to live and die for us and to be with us always. Not only is he with us, he thirsts with us. Jesus thirsts for God's love, too. He thirsts to see it take hold in the world. He thirsts to share the water of life with us so that we can drink deeply from the well of his love and in turn, share it with everyone we meet, like he did with the woman who came to the well that day when he was thirsty. She discovered that Jesus didn't judge her or belittle her for her suffering of having lost five husbands, nor for then being with a man that was not her husband. If she was at the well in the middle of the day when it was the hottest, it might have been because she knew she would not meet the townspeople who judged and rejected her—the more perfect people who came to the well later in the day when it was cool.

In the end, these townspeople whom she may have been avoiding listened to her story about Jesus. John writes that many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony. ...And many more believed because of his word. They heard for themselves, and knew that this Jesus is truly the Savior of the world.

Hope and trust in Jesus might well come from our thirst to hope and trust in Jesus. That we have faith at all is nothing we arrived at by ourselves. We were thirsty and God gave us to drink from the well of God's love. Our faith is given to us as a gift and continues to be given to us as a gift—living water for our parched selves.

What will be the sign that God loves and cares for us? How will we know? Perhaps the best way to know is to take the risk of living as if we counted solely on God and on God's life-giving love. By choosing to throw it all in with God and to depend on him utterly, we do find that God loves and cares for us in the midst of our suffering, even when relief doesn't come.

As John writes, Jesus' food is to do the will of him who sent him and to complete his work. And that work is us. It is the work of grace—God's love being poured into us for our own good and for the good of the world in which we live.

Amen.