

## **“Is God Here or Not?”**

**Exodus 17:1-7**

**August 6 2017**

One of the things that I enjoy most about our Appalachia Service Project trip, which was four weeks ago now, is that once we get down to West Virginia, and all our work crews have been assigned to their projects, then I get to just have fun.

I don't mean that I ditch the group and go find a nice hotel - although we do drive right by the renowned Greenbrier Resort. I mean ASP fun.

What I do all week is go from work site to work site - each day, I tag along with a different one of our work crews - two adults and five kids -

and whatever they're doing that day is what I do all day.

So this year, I started the week with Andy Allegretti's crew, who were pulling up a rotted floor to put in a new one ...

on Tuesday I was out with Andy Hoder and Ellen Waugh's crew, where they put me to work doing ceiling insulation.

Wednesday morning I got in the van with Jason Dies and Kim Risley.

“So what are we doing on this crew?” I asked.

“Digging a ditch,” they said.

“Okay,” I said, “after we've dug a ditch, then what?”

“Oh, no,” they said, “we've been digging this ditch since Monday morning, and it'll be ditch all day.”

They weren't kidding.

What they were digging was a ditch 180 feet long, all the way along the back of Alice's house.

Alice lived at the top of the holler, you see,

with her little house right up against the mountainside,

and when the rains came, the water rushed right down the hill and into her home.

So this crew was digging the mother of all drainage ditches.

Now, the five kids on this crew,  
they'd come to all our ASP orientations,  
they'd been to our construction skills workshop, where they learned about  
sheetrock and framing out a room,  
they'd packed their hammers and their tape measures and tool belts,  
ready to rebuild anything they were asked to.  
But it turned out the only tool they needed was a shovel.  
You might think they'd be grumpy about that, but this was one of the most  
cheerful and willing crews I've ever hung out with.  
Jumped out of the van with a spring in their step,  
and grabbed hold of their shovels to get back to work.  
Their shovels, and their God Rod.

That's right, the God Rod.

If you are digging ditches, or holes of any sort,  
you can't be without a God Rod on ASP.

The rest of the country calls it a digging bar -  
but in Appalachia it's a God Rod.

It's this big heavy metal bar with a point on the end.

When you're digging, and you hit a rock,

what you do then is grab the God Rod --

and you lift it up and drop it down and pow, the rock shatters.

So all day long, while we were digging,

the kids were calling out to each other "who's got the God Rod?

I need it over here."

I decided it was time for a little pastoral teaching.

"Hey kids," I said, "do you know *why* this is called a God Rod?"

They pondered.

"Because you feel AWESOME when you use it?" said one.

"Actually," I said, "it's based on a fascinating bible story."

The kids got that "okay, let's humor the minister" look.

So I told them the same story I just told our kids this morning.

The Hebrew people are out in the desert, on their way to the promised land,

and they are so thirsty, about to die of thirst, and there's no water.  
And God tells Moses to take a big stick, this big **rod**,  
and smash it down on a rock.  
And the rock cracks open and out comes water.  
And that's why our Appalachian friends call this the God Rod."  
"Huh," the kids said, "that is a cool story."

Yeah, it *is* a cool story.

Thirsting and panicking in the desert, the people of God receive the gift of life-giving water from the God who loves them.  
That's a cool story.

Except there's a bit more to it than that.  
You could call this story Water from the Rock,  
but you could also call it Giving up on God.  
Because that's actually what God's people have done in this story.  
Given up on God.

A little context here:

This is Exodus Chapter 17.

The first sixteen chapters of Exodus are all the stuff you know about Moses and Egypt and the Pharaoh.

There's God in a burning bush telling Moses to go rescue his people.

There's Moses saying "Let my people Go".

There's ten plagues on Egypt,

then the Hebrew people up and go,

and Moses parts the red sea so they can escape.

There's been a lot of good stuff.

But now it's not so good.

All those thousands of people who followed Moses out of Egypt  
are now refugees, struggling through the desert,

headed toward - well, they don't know what they're headed toward.

Moses has told them there will be a land of milk and honey,

but that's pretty hard to believe right now,  
because they are in a desert, and they are thirsty -- and they are panicking.  
And it actually gets a little ugly.

"Why did you bring us here?" the people say to Moses.

"Was it to kill us with thirst?"

They're despairing, they're terrified -  
and toughest of all, they're giving up on God.

The story says that they cry out:

"Is the Lord among us? ...or not?"

Is God here - or not?

And the answer comes via the original God Rod -  
Moses takes his staff and strikes a rock, and water pours forth,  
and the people are helped and healed.

In the centuries that followed, the historians and the poets of Israel  
would look back on this moment as one of the lowest points in Israel's history.

The place where it all happened came to be known as *Meribah* and *Massah*,  
the Hebrew words for *quarrel* and *test*, recalling the panic of the people.

And when the psalm writers wrote their songs of faith,

they wrote lines like this one in Psalm 95 --

"Trust in the Lord - be not like the people of *Meribah* and *Massah*."

Because they gave up on God, said the generations to come.

Those folks gave up on God.

Truth be told,

I sympathize with the people of *Meribah* and *Massah*.

I find it very understandable that they would stand there in the midst of the  
desert, with their feet blistered and their children crying,

and say "Is the Lord among us - or not?"

Is God here? Because I'm really not seeing it."

Because honestly, that's a question that people wrestle with all the time.

When things go horribly wrong,

or grief comes suddenly,  
even the most faithful among us can find themselves crying out  
“Is the Lord among us? Is God really here? Because I’m not seeing it.”  
*God, where are you?*

Even Christ himself, on the cross, in his most abject moment of despair,  
called out “my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Those are very human moments,  
those moments when the ground shifts, and we are overtaken by a fear -  
however fleeting that fear -  
that we are alone.

That’s a terrifying place to be.  
And it was terrifying for those people in the desert.  
So I have a lot of sympathy for them -  
because we’ve all been there.

At some point, all of us who are human find ourselves thirsting in the desert  
and feeling alone.

And what this story says is that no,  
we aren’t alone.  
Is the Lord among us? yes.  
Is God here? yes.  
And there is water in the desert,  
streams of water for our thirsting souls.

Maya Angelou, the wonderful author and poet whom we lost just a couple years  
ago,  
would often talk about the moment when she realized that God was there for  
her,  
that she was not alone in the desert.  
As the survivor of a childhood of tremendous hurt and deprivation,  
she had gotten to the point, she said, where she did feel alone.  
“It wasn’t that I had stopped believing in God,” she said,

“it was just that God didn’t seem to be around the neighborhoods I frequented.”

And the one day, when she was in her twenties, her voice teacher, at the end of one of her singing lessons, gave her a book of devotions. Gave it to her and asked her to read a section out loud.

This is how she told the story:

“He asked that I read a section that ended with these words: *God loves me.*

So I read the piece and closed the book, and my teacher said, “read it again.”

I pointedly opened the book, and I sarcastically read, “God loves me.”

And he said, “again.” And then again and again and again, it must have been seven times of more.

And the last time I finally said: “God. Loves. Me.”

And I began to cry.

I knew finally not only that there was a God, but that I was a child of God.

And when I understood that, when I comprehended that, then I became - courageous.”

God wouldn’t leave her alone until she heard what God was saying: that she was not alone.

It was for her the moment when there was, finally, water in the desert.

Yes, the Lord is with us.

Yes, God is here.

Almost six years ago, we invited a guest into this pulpit, another author, Kate Braestrup.

Kate writes on faith, powerfully and beautifully, books filled with joy and promise and laughter.

But when Kate visited with us, she had just recently lost her infant grandson.

And she preached a sermon to us that continues to echo in the souls of all of us who heard it,  
because it was both heartrending *and* the most powerful witness to faith that I've ever heard.

Kate told us the story of her grandson's death.

And then she asked:

*Where was God in this?*

*Where was **God**?*

And her words hung here in the air.

And then Kate said to us:

“Where was God? God was everywhere.

God was all around him and beyond him.

God was in the tenderness of the hands of the doctors as they removed the respirator.

God was the tears in the eyes of the nurse as he adjusted the anaesthesia.

God was the woman who put her arms around me as I fell apart.

God was my daughter-in-law's strength as she sang to the son that lay in her arms.

And God was the song that he heard.”

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There are deserts in our lives.

There *are*.

Is the Lord among us, we ask?

And the answer is yes.

There is water in the desert: the presence of Love,  
strength for the journey ahead.

Always there is water in the desert.

Kate Braestrup learned that.

Maya Angelou knew that.

And the people of Meribah and Massah,

watching the waters of hope spring forth from the rocky depths of their fear,  
they found it too.

Is the Lord among us? Yes, they discovered. Yes.

Just minutes ago, David White sang these words:

*When I am down and, oh, my soul, so weary - you raise me up.*

A few minutes from now, we will all sing these words:

*Amazing Grace - I once was lost, but now am found.*

All of it, all of it saying the same:

in our aloneness, we are never alone;

in the desert, there is always water.

Is the Lord among us?

Yes, and yes, and always.

Amen.