

## Septuagesima, February 5, 2023

**Readings: Exodus 17: 1-7, 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5, Matthew 20: 1-16**

### ***Grace Alone***

The people of Israel contended with the Lord in the wilderness (Ex. 17:1–7). They were dissatisfied with His provision. In the same way, the first laborers in the vineyard complained against the landowner for the wage he provided them (Matt. 20:1–16). They charged him with being unfair, but in reality, he was being generous. For the Lord does not wish to deal with us on the basis of what we deserve but on the basis of His abounding grace in Christ. The first—those who rely on their own merits—will be last. “For they were overthrown in the wilderness” (1 Cor. 10:5). But the last, those who rely on Christ, will be first. For Christ is the Rock (1 Cor. 9:24–10:5). He is the One who was struck and from whose side blood and water flowed that we may be cleansed of our sin.

### ***Sermon Transcript***

We begin in the name of God, the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. The text for this morning's message is based upon the Old Testament reading from Exodus. Grace to you and peace from God, our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Robert Orbin says, he lives in a very religious neighborhood. One time he asked the priest, "Is it true that in this neighborhood, if you carry a cross, you never have to worry?" The priest said "Yes, but it all depends on how fast you carry it."

The children of Israel were out in the wilderness and they were thirsty and they were afraid and they murmured against Moses. "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt? To kill us in our children and our livestock with thirst."

It must be a terrible feeling to worry about dying of thirst as a reminder to us how vital water is in our lives. Of course, in our affluent culture, we can afford to pay a premium, a premium price, not for just drinkable water, but for specially bottled water. One cynic writes, "Ever wonder about those who spend \$2 a bottle on Evian water? Just spell Evian backwards." I'll give you a minute. For those who are having difficulty in your mind, spelling Evian backwards, it is naive. We're told that our body needs three quarts of water a day to operate efficiently. We will die much quicker from thirst than from hunger. Water is indeed a precious commodity.

Author John Sherrill of Guidepost Magazine tells of stopping by the Lord's Ranch in the desert just outside El Paso, Texas. The Lord's Ranch houses many of the volunteers who work with the so-called rag pickers of Juarez. People who sift through the dumps of Juarez, Mexico for anything that can be sold. What impressed Sherrill most was the role water plays in these people's lives. Many rag pickers live in cardboard houses with no running water. In summer, it is not unusual for people to die of dehydration. People at the ranch take showers just two times a week, use outdoor toilets and ration water for the kitchen and their garden. "We're careful with water," says Marianne Halloran, who works with the rag pickers. She told Sherrill of a young man who with cracked and parched lips, who appeared at the back door of the ranch some years before. "May I have water? He asked." And Marianne drew a glass of water from the tap. The ranch sits on an aquifer that supplies abundant water, and in those days, no one was concerned about conserving water. The man drank

the water and then intently glared at Marianne and said, "Never, never forget that water is a gift." With that, he turned and walked away. For a moment, Marianne stood there immobilized by the impact of those words. Then feeling she should have offered the man something to eat, she ran outside to find him. No one was visible on that desert landscape. So she got in her car, drove down the road looking for this stranger, and he had vanished. Marianne pulled over to the side of the road and thought, I knew then that the man with the parched lips had come to bring a message, not just to us, but for everyone. Water is precious. Whenever we use it, we are to remember that it is a gift of God. Water is a gift. Some people predict that the next great wars will be fought over water.

The children of Israel followed Moses out of Egypt. He was going to lead them to the promised Land. The journey should have taken only a few months at most, but it took 40 years. The joke is of course, that Moses, being a man, refused to ask for directions. No wonder though, the people were dissatisfied with Moses' leadership. They were weary, they were thirsty, and they were afraid. The situation got so serious that Moses went to the Lord and asked, "What shall I do with this people? They're almost ready to stone me." We can understand, can't we? The people felt forsaken in the wilderness. You and I have been there, haven't we? We may not know what it's like to wander in a physical desert, but we've all passed through those spiritual wastelands. We have all experienced dark shadows passing over our souls.

Time Magazine, shared a report of an online survey that was done in Great Britain sometime back. One in three British citizens is downright miserable according to this survey. Why would they be so miserable? It might have something to do with one in four survey respondents reporting that they envision a hopeless future. In fact, this lack of hope is so emotionally draining that one in 10 survey respondents agreed with a statement that they would be better off dead. No hope, one in four Brits. How sad. You must wonder if the decline of hope isn't directly proportional to the decline of faith in that disenchanted land where most of the churches stand nearly empty every Sunday morning.

That is the way the people of Israel were feeling. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" They asked Moses. "To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst." The people were having a crisis of faith, and it's not unusual. All of us walk through those dark shadows from time to time in our lives.

Jack Welch who died a couple of years ago, retired as CEO of General Electric Corporation. Many people hailed him as the number one businessman in the world. He took GE and built it into one of the most profitable corporations in the world. But when he gave interviews with the media on the publication of his new book, Welch talked about his own dark shadows. When his mother died, Welch, who had been a devout churchgoer all his life, grew angry with God and withdrew from participation in his church. Welch, while still a believer contended that the principles that made him a success in business grew out of his Christian faith. But he lost his enthusiasm and his sense of commitment when he felt forsaken by God in his own wilderness experience. We can only hope that Jack Welch worked through this estrangement from God before he died.

It's not an unusual experience. The world is filled with perils and anyone who believes that faith protects us from such perils is going to be in for a painful surprise. While sports fishing off of Melbourne Beach, a tourist capsized his boat. He could swim, but his fear of alligators kept him clinging to that overturned craft, spotting an old beach comber standing on the shore. The tourist shouted, "Are there any gators around here?" "Nah." The man hollered back. "They ain't been around for years." Feeling safe, the tourist started swimming leisurely toward the shore. About halfway there, he asked the guy, "How'd you get rid of the gators?" "Oh, we didn't do

nothing," the beach bum said. "The sharks got them." We are filled with a world of perils. If it's not gators, it's sharks. If it's not sickness, it's failure. If it's not failure, it's aging. If it's not aging, it's death. There's nowhere we can run, nowhere we can hide. All of us will have our wilderness experience. All of us will spend some time in the dark shadows of life, but there's hope.

Moses went to the Lord with the children of Israel's complaints, and the Lord told Moses, "Go to a rock in Horeb and you shall strike the rock and water shall come out of it and the people will drink." The children of Israel asked God for water, and God gave them water. Here's what we need to see. God would've given them water anyway. God hadn't brought them out of Egypt to let them die in the desert. He would always provide for their needs. What they needed at that moment was not so much water, they needed reassurance. God told Moses to strike the rock, and that is what Moses did and water poured forth from the rock. The children of Israel were on a journey and soon they would need to leave that rock behind. What about the next time they grew thirsty and the next? What would they do for water then? Moses still had his rod. Moses' rod was a symbol of the power and presence of God. More than water, the children of Israel needed to know they were not alone, that God was with them and therefore nothing would defeat them.

For Christians, the cross serves the same function as Moses' rod. The cross is our symbol that when we are in the wilderness, when we are in the dark shadows that close in upon us, God is with us. We all have our fears, don't we? For the children of Israel, it was dying in the wilderness. For many of us, it's aging, sickness, our children's wellbeing, failure, being alone, and the list goes on forever and ever. But God has given us a symbol of His love and His sustaining power. There's nothing magical about the cross. It won't keep vampires away and carrying it in a dangerous neighborhood won't protect you, unless you're able to run fast enough, I guess. But when the shadows of death and a darkness gather around you, you can look to that cross and know that nothing in all creation will separate you from the love of God. Of course, Christ added even richer symbolism to this ancient story. Not only does the cross function as Moses' rod, Christ Himself is the water that flows from that rock. As Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, "He is the living water who quenches the thirsting of our souls."

Stephen Brown in his book, "When Being Good Is Not Good Enough", tells a wonderful story about when he was a junior in high school. He had a principal whom all the students feared by the name of Mr. Hunt. The teachers used Mr. Hunt as a threat. "If you aren't quiet, I will have you go see Mr. Hunt." They would say, "Oh." Stephen was sure that the worst thing that could happen to him was to have to face Mr. Hunt. Then the day that inevitable day came and he was sent to Mr. Hunt's office. He almost fainted as he walked down the hall and he knocked softly on the principal's door. "Come in." Mr. Hunt yelled. Young Stephen opened the door, but remained in the doorway, fidgeting. "Shut the door and come in son." Mr. Hunt said, "I won't bite." Well, that wasn't what Stephen had heard. In fact, he was wondering who would notify his mother in case of death. "Sit down and tell me what you want." Mr. Hunt said. Stephen sat down and he stuttered something about talking too much in class, and Mrs. Smith sending him for correction. Mr. Hunt frowned. To Stephen's amazement, Mr. Hunt told him he probably wasn't as bad as the teacher thought, but that he as principal did have a reputation to maintain in the school. "If I let you off without any kind of punishment," he said, "then everyone will think I've gone soft." So I'll tell you what I'm going to do. "Oh, here it comes." Stephen thought, "He's going to call the police and they're going to lock me up in the juvenile home for bad boys and they're going to throw away the key." Stephen was so engrossed in his fearful thoughts that he heard only the last part of what Mr. Hunt was saying. "And we'll become friends." said Mr. Hunt. "What? I'm sorry, sir." Stephen

said, "I didn't hear all you said." "I said," Mr. Hunt laughed, "that we should tell Mrs. Smith that I was so angry that I wanted you to come to my office every afternoon after school. We will sit around and talk and become friends. I'll make sure that our chats don't go so long that you miss the bus." They did, Stephen reports, become friends. He never told Mrs. Smith what Mr. Hunt had said. He made a point of looking very sad every time he left the office every afternoon, especially when Mrs. Smith was around. He wouldn't talk about it with his friends, and they just figured out it was too horrible for words. The best part of the day, he says, became the time he spent with Mr. Hunt. He still looks back on those times with delight.

To a generation that kept God at a distance, who were more apt to fear God than to love Him. Jesus showed us that God was the best friend we could ever have. We don't ever need to fear that God will forget us nor forsake us. Look to the cross, that symbol of God's presence and God's power and God's love. Look to Christ who is the living water who satisfies our thirsty souls. Amen.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.