

Text: Exodus 17:1-7

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February 24, 2008

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One of the biggest misconceptions people have about Exodus and Moses leading the people through the wilderness is that they were lost. Some people believe that they wandered around in the wilderness aimlessly for 40 years because they didn't know what they were doing or where they were going. When, in fact, God was directing them the whole time. The first verse in our text today states that the entire congregation of Israel journeyed by stages, as commanded by the Lord. This journey through the wilderness had purpose. It was not as if God just wanted the people to struggle for 40 years in the wilderness. God wanted them to learn and grow in their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. As many of you well know, growth takes place in stages. While God was directing this journey, it is still true that the journey was difficult and had its share of ups and downs.

Several years ago I went to Six Flags with a group the Dawson church. We arrived at the park just as it opened and spent the entire day riding rides and having a good time. I am not a fan of roller coasters, so when the group decided to ride a big roller coaster, I sat on a bench and waited. I actually enjoyed sitting on the bench because it gave me a chance to people watch. As our group waited in line to ride The Titan, I walked over to another ride and watched the people as they sat in their seats and buckled up. It was the Conquistador. This is the ship ride that goes up and down and makes you feel like your stomach is somewhere in California when you are done. I have actually ridden this ride before and I don't like it much more than I like roller coasters! There was a little girl riding the Conquistador that day and as the ride started it was all smiles and laughter. But then as the ship went higher and higher and faster and faster, her smile turned into a look of panic and fear. She screamed, "Let me off of this thing! I want to get off! Stop the ride! Stop the ride!" Unfortunately for her, there was no way to stop the momentum of the ship. Once she buckled herself in on the ride she was on for good – for better or worse.

I can't help but think that the Israelites had the same reaction in the wilderness. Yes, they had witnessed some amazing things, not the least of which is the parting of the Red Sea. God had provided for them over and over again, but now they were far along in the journey and were without enough water. Like the little girl on the ride at Six Flags, they began to say to Moses, "Stop the ride! Stop the ride! Let us off this thing! Why did you bring us out of Egypt to let us die of thirst in the wilderness?" To put it simply, the people were whining and complaining.

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There is a story about a cowboy who was driving down a dirt road with his dog riding in the back of his pickup and his faithful horse in the trailer behind. He failed to negotiate a curve and had a bad accident. A few minutes after the accident a highway patrol officer came on the scene. An animal lover, he saw the horse first. Realizing the serious nature of the horse's injuries, he pulled out his pistol and put the animal out of his misery. He walked around the other side of the accident and found the dog. The dog was critically injured and the officer couldn't bear to hear him crying out in pain. So he ended the dog's suffering as well. Finally, the officer located the cowboy. The cowboy had suffered multiple fractures and was off in the weeds. The officer asked the cowboy, "Hey, are you okay?" The cowboy took one look at the smoking revolver in the trooper's hands and quickly replied, "Never felt better!"

There's another story about a monk who joined a monastery and took a vow of silence. After the first ten years his superior called him in and asked, "Do you have anything to say?" The monk replied, "Food bad." After another ten years the monk again had the opportunity to voice his thoughts. He said, "Bed hard." Another ten years went by and again he was called in before his superior. When asked if he had anything to say, he responded, "I quit." His superior responded, "It doesn't surprise me a bit. You've done nothing but complain ever since you got here!"

Anyone here ever whined and complained about anything? You know it's not fun to be around people who constantly complain. It can literally suck the life right out of you. Just imagine if I had started this sermon off by saying something like this: "I'm tired today. I could have stayed in bed because my head hurts and it has been a long week. Besides that I really didn't like my breakfast today. Yes, I cooked it myself but I didn't like it. The pancake mix didn't mix well and the syrup tasted a little bit different. And I haven't even mentioned the coffee. Something is wrong with my coffee maker. It takes forever to make a pot of coffee! Then when I got to church today someone had parked where I normally park. Okay let's open our Bibles and turn to Exodus..." Needless to say, that would not be the best approach to get you engaged in this sermon. But aren't we all whiners and complainers to some degree? We would not be human if we didn't have something or someone to complain about, but there comes a point where enough is enough.

If you have ever been in any kind of leadership position then you know what it's like to have people standing at your door complaining.

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Never mind that you have nothing at all to do with the complaint or issue, you just have a target on your back that says, “Unload your problems here!” After a while it can really get to you.

Moses had a big target on his back and the people were taking target practice that day. Whining to Moses was in season. The people said to Moses, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” The people responded, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” Suddenly, the people had projected all of their problems on Moses.

Can anyone here identify with Moses? I can't identify with Moses in a lot of different areas. I have never stared down a Pharaoh. I have never walked down a mountain with the Ten Commandments, and I have sure enough never parted a sea. But I have had people dump problems on me and expect me to snap my fingers and make everything better. So in that one area I can relate to Moses. I have learned that being a pastor opens you up to all kinds of praise and criticism. People either think you are the greatest thing since sliced bread or that you are a bumbling idiot who doesn't have a clue. There's generally not much in between. In reality, most pastors fall somewhere in between the greatest thing since sliced bread and a bumbling idiot. That's another way of saying, leaders should not take too much credit when things go well because they are not totally responsible for the success, and they shouldn't take all the blame when things don't go well because chances are they are not solely responsible.

Moses realized that he was in a no-win situation. He was thirsty just like everyone else, but he knew that he alone could not bring forth the much-needed water. So Moses did what most of us should do in times like these but very often do not – he called on God for help. A friend of mine told me a story about a lady in his church who worked for a marketing company. She spent most of her day answering the 800-number for the company. This one particular Monday the phone was ringing off the hook. She had two or three calls at one time and was having to put people on hold. She would say, “Good morning, may I put you on hold?” and then answer the other line. By the end of the day she was so rattled she answered a call by saying, “Hold me!” She meant to say, “Hold please,” but her gut said, “Hold me.” In other words, “Someone help me!”

Moses said to God, “What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.” Some of us might see Moses' response as a sign

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of weakness, but I see his response as a sign of his greatness. I believe this was one of Moses' finest moments. Moses had some great moments in his life but this one sticks out for me. He knew that he was nothing without God and he called on God in one of his most trying moments.

Moses knew his limitations and he knew who to call on when things got rough. God said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; 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."

I think God's response to Moses is fascinating. He didn't say, "No problem, I'll take care of it" or "Get over it Moses" or "Let's think about this for a minute Moses." Instead, he told Moses to go on ahead of the people. To be a good leader of any organization or group of people very often you have to go ahead of those you are leading, even when you are not totally sure of your destination. That may be one of the hardest lessons for leaders to learn. If you always stay where the majority wants to stay for comfort sake you will not get anywhere. The worst thing Moses could have done would have been to form a committee to talk about why they didn't have enough water. He then could have broken that group into a study committee to evaluate possible alternatives and report back to the group later. But that wouldn't have solved the problem. They would have still been thirsty and would have been even more agitated. Moses needed to get moving and go where God told him to go without seeing the big picture in advance.

I love to go to Red River, New Mexico. It is a beautiful place to visit and have a relaxing vacation. I remember the first time I went to Red River. We had been driving all day and were ready to get out of the car. We had been winding our way through the mountains and were beginning to wonder if we had taken a wrong turn. With each curve in the mountain road I thought to myself, "This next curve has to be it." This went on for quite some time and then out of nowhere, around the bend Red River appeared -- this beautiful town tucked between the mountains in the valley.

That is what it is like for us at times spiritually. We are traveling down this road and that road wondering if we really are headed in the right direction, and then without warning, God appears and is not only with us, but is out in front of us. Did you notice the order of our story? God is out in

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front with Moses and the other elders behind, and then come the rest of the people. God, the source of life and in this case water, is at the forefront ready to provide for his children as long as they will follow. I believe it's very important for you and me to remember that God is our one true leader and that if we are not following him we are bound to struggle. Let's be honest, sometimes it's not all that clear where God is leading us. Sometimes it feels like we are throwing a bunch of stuff up on a wall to see if any of it sticks, but at the end of the day, we know that we are guided by the Spirit and just as Moses and the people were obedient to God's call and direction, so too do we need to be obedient.

All of us in one way or another are followers. We might be leaders at certain times in our lives and in certain settings, but we are ultimately all followers of Jesus. There is a story about a young woman who wanted to go to college. Her heart sank as she read the question on the application that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being honest about it, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst.

Much to her surprise, she later received a letter from the college that read: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

Whether we are called to lead like Moses or follow like the rest of the people, one thing is for sure – it is God who is leading us and we are called to be obedient in whatever role God has given us in God's kingdom.