

There they stand at Mount Horeb, far away from the land of Egypt; and do you know what that means?

It means that after 400 years of enforced labor, the children of Israel are not slaves anymore. It means they've been saved from death as they passed through the Red Sea on dry ground. It means that already the Lord has provided quail and manna for them to eat. And, He is not just leading them from, but to: To the Promised Land of Canaan, their new home. They have God's Word on it.

They are free; but on this day, the congregation of Israel is in a really bad mood. They surround Moses with menacing scowls and angry eyes. They are camped at barren Rephidim, and there is no water to be found. Rather than remember past miracles, the Israelites are full of fear and discontent. They pepper Moses with angry accusations and demands: "Give us water, that we may drink." "Why is it you have brought us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" Moses notes that some of them are beginning to eye some stones in a rather alarming manner.

He warns them with God's Law: "Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the Lord?" There is a bigger problem here than the lack of water and the physical thirst. The fact that the people are thirsty is not the principal crisis; no, the problem is a spiritual thirst. Rather than trust in the promises of God, they would rather fight with Him, because they are, at the moment, unhappy.

Only the Lord can deliver them, so Moses rightly appeals to Him: "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!" The Lord responds. He instructs Moses to take the elders and lead the people to Horeb. There, God will stand upon a rock. Moses is to take His rod and strike the rock. The people will no longer be thirsty.

Moses follows the Word of the Lord. He leads the people to Horeb. He takes his rod and strikes the rock, and water begins to flow: Enough water for all Israel, including the children and the livestock. Because of the gracious gift of God, the people are saved and satisfied.

Moses names the place Massah and Meribah: "Strife" and "Contention." The people contended with the Lord there, accusing Him of being unfaithful. Yet the Lord did not abandon them there; He provided for them despite their argumentative spirit.

God once again proves faithful. Why? Some might say, simply, "Because He is, after all, God." But I think we can refine that: God is faithful because these people are His redeemed. Out of Israel the Savior will be born. He will die on the cross for their strife and contention. Because He is coming to pay that price for the sins of the world, God shows mercy to His people at Massah and Meribah. It is for the sake of Jesus that they remain His people.

It's on another hill, centuries later, that we meet another group of people who ought to be thankful, who are instead in a rotten mood. It is Passover week, the annual celebration to remind them of their deliverance from Egypt. But as this festival reaches its climax, they've taken time off for a crucifixion.

There is great spiritual thirst here, too. Instead of living by faith, the crowd is motivated by anger, fear, jealousy, uninformed hatred. There's no need for them to pick up stones; they already have Him nailed to a cross. And there's no need for a Moses to serve as go-between with God: The Lord is there.

That crucified Lord speaks. Two words: "I thirst."

"I thirst." After the beatings, the horrible Roman whip and the catastrophic loss of blood, it's no surprise that He is thirsty. But just like at Massah and Meribah, there is something else happening here: Jesus is suffering spiritual thirst as He takes the sinner's place on the cross. He is taking God's wrath for the Israelites who grumbled at Massah and Meribah. He is suffering God's punishment for the mob that scoffs below Him. He is dying for every time humanity has thirsted for counterfeit gods. He is dying to pay for it all.

Throughout the Bible, we hear about thirst. The prophet Isaiah calls out to Jerusalem, "Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat." You may remember our Lord's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, when He says, "...Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." (Jn. 4:14) Or His public sermon in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles, where He cries out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (Jn. 7:37-38).

The Lord has water to give, but to quench our spiritual thirst, He must become dehydrated in our place. This is what happens on the cross. He becomes parched so that the world might be flooded with His grace.

All this is foretold way back at Massah and Meribah. When the people of Israel are thirsty and rebellious, the Lord commands Moses to strike a rock with his rod. One wouldn't think that a stick would do much to open a rock; yet by the Lord's will, that rod opens the rock's side, and water flows out for all. Centuries later, a Roman soldier approaches Jesus with a spear. One wouldn't think that any man could do much to the Son of God; yet by the Lord's will that spear opens up the Savior's side, and blood and water flow out. For all.

So here we are, wandering for a while in the wilderness. We are moving toward our own Promised Land.

As long as we journey through the wilderness, there is still strife and contention. Life itself is an ongoing gift of God, and the Lord showers blessings on us daily; yet it is all too easy to take those blessings for granted and see only the trouble. We compound the difficulty by thirsting

for things and people more than God. And it happens so quietly. If you're not examining yourself for this, you might miss it entirely. How do you know if you are thirsting for something more than God? Here are some questions that get to the heart of it:

To who or what do you look for stability, security, and success?

What do you feel you must have in order to be fulfilled or significant?

What do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart?

What do your spending patterns reveal about your thirsts?

What are you really living for?

Now here's the hard truth about our thirsts. Anything that becomes more important to us than God; anything that becomes more non-negotiable than God becomes an enslaving idol. If you live an unexamined life, if you don't stop to really think about what is driving your feelings and actions, you'll just follow your thirst to those idols, and you'll drink deeply of them, and you'll be crushed. You know why? Because they won't satisfy you. They might quench you at first, they might give a momentary sense of relief, but it won't last. You achieve something great; but that was yesterday. You made a lot of money, but it doesn't feel like enough. You've got the romantic love you wanted, but what if they leave? Do you understand? We can take good things and utterly ruin them when we give them priority over God.

It can be disturbing to learn just how much we let our thirsts control us. But there is a way out. Or to stick with the metaphor, there is a spring, there is a source of fresh water that gives renewable life. In a word, that source is Jesus. He must become more beautiful to you than any person you are thirsting for. He must become more attractive to your heart than any symbol of status you're pursuing. That happens only when you take a deep, long look at what Jesus did for you in His suffering and death. Look at what your sin—our sin—cost God. Look at Jesus, paying that price. Don't you agree that He is the one who deserves all of our allegiance, loyalty, and love?

As He was at Massah, Meribah and the cross, the Lord is still faithful. The Son of God has thirsted for your sin. He has allowed the water and blood to flow.

The water still flows. The Lord speaks His Word with water; and floods your dry bones in Holy Baptism. The blood still runs. Because you will always thirst in this wilderness life, the Lord speaks His Word with bread and wine. To His people, thirsty for grace, he says "Take and eat, this is My body - take and drink, this is My blood - for the forgiveness of sins."

Don't be in such a hurry to leave the scene of Jesus' cross.

Hear him say, "I thirst." Lord, teach us to reply, "I thirst for you."