

October 1, 2017
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Water from a Rock”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Exodus 17:1-17 ~ Matthew 21:23-32

This guy brings a bolt of fine cloth to his Jewish tailor and asks him to make a pair of pants. A week later he returns, but the pants aren't ready. Two weeks later he returns, but the pants still aren't ready. Three weeks, four weeks, five weeks – still no pants! Finally, after six weeks, the pants *are* finally ready. They fit perfectly! Nevertheless, the man can't resist a jibe at the tailor. "You know," he says, "it took God only six days to make the world. But it took you six weeks to make a single pair of pants." "Ah," says the tailor, "But look at this pair of pants ... and look at the world!"

Every generation agrees the world is in worse shape than ever before. I don't know. Maybe I just wasn't paying attention when I was young. Or maybe I didn't have the perspective I do now. But the world does often seem to be spinning out of control ... spiraling backwards towards prehistoric barbarism. I can hardly stand to pick up the newspaper these days or watch the evening news. As if natural disasters aren't enough ... hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, wildfires, and the like ... look what's happening to human society. War ravaged nations and desperate refugees ... ethnic cleansing ... tribe against tribe. In our own country ... in our own town ... we can't keep guns out of the hands of children.

We can't agree on how to fix these problems of violence and poverty and homelessness and bigotry and avarice, and the truth is, there is no easy fix. It's like trying to get water from a rock. They are political footballs, with mutual recriminations on every side. The public grows more cynical with each episode in the way our politicians exploit these events for political gain. As the waters recede, the candidates flood the area in quest of sound bytes for the six o'clock news. In the church we work so hard for positive change, but where is the change? We pray for peace and healing, but where is the healing? And where is God in all this? Sometimes I wonder, sometimes *I wonder*, is God among us or not?

I like this question that the Hebrews asked Moses at the waters of Massah and Meribah. It is an honest inquiry of a disappointed faith. From the Hebrew Bible to the modern rabbis, the Jewish people have openly questioned God. We read it in the Psalms, the prophets, Job, and even Jesus, "How long, oh Lord?" "Where is the hope of his coming?" "Is God among us or not?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Somehow in our Christian tradition, we have lost the art of dialogue with God. It feels too disrespectful, too irreverent. But the questions are still there, eating at our hearts even if we can't bring them to our lips. The questions rise when we see senseless suffering ... when our prayers go unanswered ... when we see our loved ones go through "the valley of the shadow of death." We *do* fear evil there, and we reasonably wonder whether God is with us or not.

We wonder about God's passive inaction in moments of distress, and maybe about God's possible mistake in creating humanity at all ... a free-willed humanity capable of perpetrating evil almost godlike in its scope. But I also think, like those ancient Hebrews, that our wonder is an expression of faith.

When God disappoints our expectations, we must test whether our expectations were accurate in the first place. Beyond this, if we are honest, we should question God. But questioning God presumes *God is there* ... with us ... and listening. That is why honest questioning is more faithful than passive acceptance of a world where God seems absent.

I honor the open ended, honest challenge of God born out of the experience of suffering ... and the questioning of God's wisdom in creating a humanity which commits such evil. A faith which does *not* ask such questions in the face of experience is either the superstition of the self-righteous ... or the insensitivity of the pampered ... or the denial of those who are afraid to seek the truth. God can stand our questions.

The irony of the Israelites asking whether God is among them or not ... when they are thirsty in the wilderness ... is that God has just delivered them from slavery to the Egyptians and already fed them with manna. They want it easy, but freedom is never easy. And neither is faith. We have a right to question God's faithfulness in our experience of pain, but not with the "what have you done for me lately" attitude of spoiled children. God is not our servant; we are God's servants. And our questions should be asked in the context of gratitude for all the good God has given us, beginning with the gift of life itself.

What if *our* existence is God's answer to the question of evil in the world? Even as we ask "Is God with us or not?" shouldn't *we* answer the question affirmatively with our own lives? It is *our* job to demonstrate an alternative to the world. *We* are called to be like Christ ... to absorb the suffering and transform it into grace. *We* are the evidence in the continuing trial of God ... co-creators in our own free will with the one who intended better for humanity than what humanity has accomplished so far. Will God's goodness be proven by what *we* become? Only if we have the mind of Christ.

We will always have bad news ... but the good news is better than the bad news is bad. And I submit there are still more stories of goodness and grace than stories of evil and violence. We need to focus our attention more upon those ... the untold stories of faithfulness and courage. I want the tabloids to cover those saints in our church who have raised healthy families ... made contributions to our world with their careers ... built a church ... and have taken care of the needs of their neighbors. Every day in this city, people are doing good things ... sacrificing themselves to family and work and community ... helping strangers ... teaching our children ... lifting the burdens of the poor ... making new connections to strengthen the fabric of our common life ... planting trees that another generation will enjoy when we are all gone. I want somebody to publicly acknowledge those countless unheralded acts of kindness and beauty. I wish *60 Minutes* would come and talk to the nine members of our upcoming confirmation class. They could report the hope of the next generation ... as witnessed by the lives of these outstanding young people. The reporter could say, "Look how God is with us. Look how God is with us in this good, good life." *Yes, God is with us.*

I don't know why people get cancer. I don't understand the devastation of hurricanes, earthquakes and floods killing men, women, and children alike regardless of their goodness or

evil. I don't know how a mentally ill man can kill the members of a Bible study in a church ... or how disenfranchised teens can murder their fellow students in mass school shootings. I certainly don't understand how or why the hatred of neo-Nazis and white supremacists seems ever present. But this I do know, there is far more goodness in the world than there is evil. And it is our mission in the world ... as the church of Jesus Christ ... to add to that goodness.

Today, we celebrate World Communion Sunday. It is a recognition of our unity and of our mission in life, to embody Jesus Christ in the world. We are his hands and feet. We are his eyes and ears. We are his heart. We are his love. Sometimes we don't get it right. We have a lot to apologize for in the history of humankind ... some corporate sins to confess. Sometimes we've been hateful and exclusive instead of loving and embracing. We've been racist, sexist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, self-righteous, selfish, greedy, narrow-minded and hard-hearted and small-souled ... an embodiment of the very sins which placed Jesus on the cross. But Jesus calls us to the table to remind us that we are forgiven ... that we are included ... that we are still called to a great and beautiful mission in life. We remember Jesus, remember his body and blood. And we remember each other.

When you receive from this table you should remember, "I'm somebody's child ... I am a child of God." When you receive from this table, you should remember, "I'm somebody's brother. I'm somebody's sister. I'm part of a great family." When you receive from this table you should remember, "I have a mission in life, to be the body of Christ ... to carry his love in my heart and words and actions to each person I meet."

Our mission isn't to think the right things or believe the right things ... but *to do* the right things ... to love in the ways that matter. So today, let's join the church around the world – "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," as Paul writes elsewhere. He tells us, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph 4:3-6). And that *is* the one mission in life which we share ... to know Christ and to make him known by the places we go ... the things we say ... the things we do ... the groups we join ... the persons we become ... the people we become together in the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord. And it *is* a beautiful thing. So, beloved, with all our brothers and sisters, let us remember that when we receive the gifts from the table of our Lord. Amen.

May we pray?

Gracious and loving God, we don't pretend to understand everything that happens in the world. Many of our questions wait for an answer only time and eternity will bring. But we do know you have been good to us beyond our deserving and that your love has touched us in ways we take for granted. We ask our questions in faith, and we ask about evil with gratitude for all the good you have showered upon us. We respond again today to your invitation to the table ... to your call to the mission. As we come today to remember your body and blood, make us your body and blood, your holy people called out and set aside to embody your love to all humankind in the name of Christ. Amen.