

The Rock That Springs with the Water of Life

Exodus 17: 1-7; John 4: 5-30; Romans 5: 1-11

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The eminent Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked, perhaps at the height of Hitler's monstrous power, what he would say to the Führer if he had the chance to confront him. Barth's questioner assumed that he would fire a volley of accusations: "You horrible creature! You who have slain millions of Jews and thousands of gypsies and homosexuals, what a brute you are! Not only have you ruined Germany, but you will soon ruin the rest of the world if you are not stopped! Fall on your face and repent! Command your officers to free all whom you have captured! Surrender to the Allies who have themselves lost their many thousands in trying to halt your savagery! Apologize to the German people for having ruled like a tyrant! Reverse yourself now, Herr Hitler, before both God and man!" To the utter astonishment of his friend, Barth said instead: "If ever I could confront the Reichschancellor, I would do nothing other than quote Romans 5:8: 'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.'"

Why would Karl Barth pass up his only chance of indicting one of history's most demonic dictators? Wouldn't Barth have thus acted with terribly irresponsibility? Would he have not lost his only opportunity of bringing the fiend to his knees? Not at all. Barth knew that if he accused Hitler of his many horrors, no matter how accurate the indictment surely would have been, Hitler would have immediately begun to justify his behavior. "The German economy was in trouble, and the Jewish financiers were draining it dry. Germany could not have a unified culture with all of these non-Aryans in its midst. The gays and the gypsies were marks of a massive decadence that had to be cleaned up." And so on and so on. Barth knew all too well that every evil we commit, we can also justify. To accuse someone of evil is almost always to get a diatribe of recrimination in response. When we pummel them, they pummel us. But to the word of forgiveness there can be no self-defense.

When friend or enemy forgives us, or when we forgive enemy or friend, there are only two responses: either acceptance or rejection. And if we accept forgiveness, it's not because we humiliate ourselves in groveling shame. It's because the gracious act enables our gracious response. Theologians call it "prevenient grace," the grace that comes before and makes possible our very embrace of it. To receive and embrace God's forgiveness leaves us nothing to do nothing but the most important thing of all: to correct the evils for which we have been forgiven. This is the point that we are meant to learn again in Lent. Though we deserve nothing, God provides and enables everything necessary: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"—the ten most precious syllables in our mother tongue.

I. We Are a People Thirsting for More Than Water

The first lesson from Exodus 17 deals with the Israelites as a faultfinding people. They grumbled at God. They murmured and whined. They wearied of wandering for forty years in the wilderness, eating nothing but manna, even though it tasted like wafers with honey. They grew so tired of God's way with them that they sought their own way. They would eventually fashion themselves an idol, an image of the god whom they *wished* they had

followed: a snorting and pawing, a horn-thrusting bull, a brute male deity of sheer potency, a bovine Hitler. No wonder that Moses smashed it to dust.

Yet we must not judge the Israelites too harshly. Like them, we too want deliverance now, not tomorrow, much less sometime in the far future. God has sent us into these forty days of repentance, asking us to feed off nothing but the manna of contrition. The color of this season is purple, the hue of the bruised conscience, the tint of the battered heart. Thus should we remember that we are indeed like them, a guilty people. Like theirs, ours is a barren world, dry and barren time. The narrator in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) describes our plight with a telling analogy: "When the water holes are dry," says Waugh, "people seek to drink at the mirage." We Texans know that, when the brilliant summer sun would glint off the old cement highways, it would give the appearance of a lake at the bottom of the hill we had just topped. Then it would vanish as we approached it. Yet we're trying to drink there.

I need to name only a few of the many mirages from which we are seeking to drink: our titillating *escapism* built largely on violence and pornography; our deadly *boredom* during a singularly unedifying political campaign; our massive *greed* for creature comforts and technical gadgets, when much of the Third World starves or else dies of malnutrition as well as curable diseases; and, perhaps worst of all, our moral *numbness* to the genocide in Darfur, the violence in Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan, the endless strife between the Israelis and the Palestinians. These are the waterless mirages that Lent calls us to abandon. We are called to turn, instead, to the true water that nourishes our parched lives and deserted culture.

Unlike us, the Israelites were dying of literal no less than spiritual thirst. Unlike our forty days of Lenten penitence, they would eventually wander for forty years in the Wilderness of Sinai. Having been delivered from Egyptian slavery, they had been promised a land flowing with milk and honey. Instead, they had come to a place called Horeb, which means "barrenness." Surely God's people had cause for their complaint, and surely we must sympathize with their lament against Moses their leader. "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt," they cried, "to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?"

Yes, God hears Israel's plea. Yes, He supplies his people with their most immediately need—water, the source of life. Yet we must note ever so well that God does not act *on Israel's terms*. Indeed, Yahweh is **angry** that Israel has demanded that He be *demonstrate* his faithfulness—as if He would not otherwise have made good on his promise. And so, to remind Israel that His provision is always miraculous rather than something obvious and thus to be taken for granted—a mere matter of stopping long enough to dig a well—God has Moses strike a solid rock, the least likely place to find a hidden spring of water. Yet such is always the nature of our complaint and such is always the nature of God's grace. He grants us not what we want so much as what we need. He quenches our spiritual no less than our physical thirst. Lent thus reminds us of the real miracle: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

II. We Are a Well-Watered People

The question is not whether the Horeb event, like most other biblical events, can be proved or disproved with the tools of science and history. Be assured that St. Paul employed no such addle-pated literalism when he interpreted this story. The real question, as he understands, is not whether it happened but what does it mean? Paul asked the question that almost all of our ancestors in the faith asked: Where is Christ mysteriously figured in this event? How is the whole pattern of salvation already present here? Listen to these words he addresses to the church at Corinth in order to distinguish between an apostle and a professor:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea, and all ate the supernatural food, and all drank the supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (1 Cor 10: 1-4)

How remarkable! The crossing of the Red Sea was Israel's baptism. The daily manna on which Israel fed was the body of Christ. The water that gushed from the side of the rock was the blood of Christ. And the Rock that Moses struck was none other than Christ himself! And that's not all. Christ the new Moses was not only leading Israel under the guise of the old Moses; he was also following them like the Hound of Heaven, making sure that they arrived in the Promised Land of salvation. Other ancient commentators also link the day-cloud and the night-fire to the Holy Spirit's guiding presence. Thus are we Christians none other than the original Israel in contemporary form as the ecclesial people of God! Yet we know it only because our foreparents in the Faith were not afraid of allegory. Indeed, it was their spiritual meat and drink. They read Scripture through types and anti-types, through foreshadowings and fulfillments, through analogies and likenesses—not to play a mere game but to make us messengers of the good news that “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”

Our lectionary texts make a similar link between Moses' striking water from the rock at Horeb with Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. It may have been the well where Jacob met his long-awaited wife Rachel and drew water for her. Except here the roles are reversed, though the gender difference remains at the fore. The nameless woman is startled that Jesus would approach her. Ancient rabbis did not speak to women in public, especially not to despised Samaritan women. What is going on here? We must not jump too quickly to a figural reading of this encounter. For it's blazing noon, Jesus has traveled far, and he's both weary and thirsty. He wants a deep drink of refreshing water from this well that is no mere cistern but an opening to underground springs. So must we remind ourselves that the needs of the world are rarely spiritual alone but also physical. Jesus warns sharply against our not feeding the hungry, not giving drink to the thirsty, not visiting the prisoners and the shut-ins. We do not belong to Christ's people unless we do these things, as Matthew 25 makes clear.

Yet we must also be clear about the distinction between the two kinds of water and thus the two kinds of ministry. The Samaritan woman learns it slowly but clearly. At first, she thinks Jesus is a prophet because he knows that she has been married five times but is now living out of wedlock. Thus has she added adultery to her outcast character. Yet Jesus does not scold her—either for failing to recognize that he is more than a prophet, or for living in a state of sin. Instead, he reverses roles, from having been the one who asked to the one who gives. “Those who drink of the water that *I* give,” says Jesus, “shall never thirst again.” Instead, they shall become springs of “water welling up to eternal life.”

Perhaps sensing that her kindness to him will make her receptive to the Good News, Jesus eventually informs the Samaritan woman that he is the long-expected Christ, the Messiah of Israel. We are told only that she left her water jar and went about asking whether it could be true that the Water of Life actually springs from this man Jesus? Yet we can surmise that she did something else. Having received the living water of transforming forgiveness, we can be assured that she also brought an end to her adulterous life, not in guilt but in gratitude. So are we called to do as she did—to live according to the Good News. For no matter how arid our culture, no matter how great our guilt and thus our thirst, we are offered the water of life, the Cup of salvation, the sign that “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us”?

III. We Are Meant to Serve as Living Water for Others

With every divine blessing comes a divine command. There is no cheap grace, no quenching of our thirst that doesn't prompt us to quench the thirst of others. Salvation is free precisely because discipleship is so costly. Because we pay nothing for it, we give everything in return. Francis Cardinal George, the archbishop of Chicago, put the matter well when he said, "Our job as Christians is to spend our lives trying to convince people that suffering and death are good for you." This surely is the heart of Christ's promise to the Samaritan woman. Those who drink from his cup shall gladly suffer and even die in order that others might not suffer and die of physical or spiritual thirst.

What would it mean for us, in this time and this place, to become springs of water welling up to eternal life? Remember that, for Jesus, "eternal life" does not mean pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. It means God's Kingdom beginning here and now, even as it shall be made perfect and complete there and then. Let two examples suffice, both of them personal and local. I know that preachers aren't supposed to use personal illustrations, but then I'm not a preacher! And I have permission to use these stories.

Celina Varela, as her name indicates, is Hispanic. Her parents worked very hard to see that she receive a good education. She did. In fact, she finished at the top of her class at Truett Seminary, where I had the honor of teaching her. With such a fine academic record, Celina was poised to pursue virtually any kind of ministry that God might lead her to, perhaps to some prestigious place where her salary would be commensurate with her fancy title. Thus would she "make her parents proud," as we like to say. And yet the Christ standing at Jacob's well led Celina to drink a different cup of water. He led her to get rid of all the possessions that would not fit into her second-hand clunker, and to strike out for Chicago. There she lives communally with a mainly Mennonite group called Reba Place, an inner-city ministry that seeks to bring both kinds of water to the down-and-out of Evanston, Illinois. Her parents understand, I might add, that Celina is paying them the highest possible tribute. For they did not rear her "to make a name for herself," but to be a servant of Christ, doing work that the world doesn't bother to reward.

Matt Waller is also a Baylor alumnus, the son of Baptist missionaries to South America, an honors graduate who could have easily made his way to graduate school or to a well-paying job in the business world. Instead, Matt has spent this year teaching the poor people of Bolivia and Ethiopia how to dig wells, so that they might literally have fresh water to drink—but also to know that the ground water is a sign of the Spring that wells up to eternal life. Instead of grumbling about the low pay and the hard conditions, Matt has recently written to say that he almost feels guilty about having so great a privilege. I quote him: "At the moment, this trip is almost purely selfish. I love the well drilling, the tangible hard-day's work, the rural setting, [the] rural people, and so forth. I don't think that I could say, in good conscience, that I'm making any sacrifices. I grew up in a third world country, and I've missed the lifestyle.... Surely the yoke is too easy, the burden too light, for this experience to be a sacrifice."

Neither Celina nor Matt asked God to promise rewards in exchange for service God forbids such selfish deals, such faithless tests of his goodness. Instead, these young people are doing what Lent calls us all to do: to drink from the crystal fountain that will never run dry, from the Spring of living water that wells up to eternal life. Lent calls us to by-pass the mirages, to tap this Rock from whom our salvation pours forth, to remember that "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Come, let us eat of this manna and drink from this Cup. Amen.