

Sermon  
Kirk of St James  
Sunday March 22, 2020  
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It has been a difficult week and I know all of us are likely feeling it. The narrative around the corona virus really shifted this week and suddenly things felt more urgent, more worrisome, and more anxious. Travel plans had to be changed, and new notices were coming out from governments and health agencies. I spent most of my day Friday just trying to figure out what we should do today and there were no easy answers. We care about everyone and we want to make sure our practices are best practices. Then there was grocery shopping. I normally do my grocery shopping late Friday afternoon and what a mistake that was! I was not really thinking about the fall out from the increased concerns surrounding the virus and oh my goodness when I walked through the doors of Superstore, I thought I was on another planet. And the weirdest things were sold out. I wanted to try an old bread recipe of my mothers and I could not find yeast even though we stopped at several stores! I had no idea that many people still made bread. Everything I encountered in town spoke to the fear, anxiety and uncertainty that people were feeling.

When we read the story in Exodus today, we find people up against many of those same emotions. They need water, one of the most crucial things humans need for survival. It must have been terrifying for them as they looked around and realized there was not a drop anywhere. They likely started calculating how far they had come since they had last found water and were trying to figure out if they could make it back before people or livestock started to die. Then their fear began to manifest into frustration and anger. What was the point of leaving Egypt, of fleeing through the sea that parted for them, and traveling on and on if it was only to die here in the wilderness? At least if they were still in Egypt, they would be

alive. Better to be working in misery for the Egyptians than dead in the wilderness. It is amazing how fear and uncertainty can get under our skin and affect our responses to things. Perhaps like me you found it curious that toilet paper became the item sold out across the city. The hand sanitizer I could make sense of, but toilet paper baffled me. Australia had to hire security guards to patrol the aisles. Perhaps like me you started reading articles on why that is the case. Of course there are a number of theories everything from wanting to be prepared, to perceived scarcity creating actual scarcity, and resorting to extremes because there are conflicting messages coming from all directions but, one of the most honest answers is that it returns a sense of control to a situation that feels totally out of our control.

The problem for the Israelites is that while they are travelling through the wilderness, they have no control over anything. If there is no food there is no food, and if there is no water—that changes their entire outlook. Lack of resources becomes a matter of life or death very quickly. When we are faced with scary situations like that fear can become a driving force and cause us to have short memories. The people begin murmuring and voicing their fears. As one writer stated the wilderness generation makes an assumption that seems quite natural and universal. “When they have what they need and want, they believe God is with them. In times of hunger, thirst, and affliction, they deem themselves abandoned and betrayed. Worse, they wonder if God has ever travelled with them.” Perhaps if we were to take a moment to think about it, we can echo some of those same feelings and fears. It is easy to believe God is with us and for us when things are going according to plan and good news is in large supply. However, the moment when things begin to fall apart it feels like God has abandoned us at one of the most difficult times in our lives. We find ourselves crying out “where are you God, why is this happening, why are you not helping me?” I could make a list of the times that I have felt that way in my own life. Everything from trivial to pressing

concerns can begin to be viewed through that lens. Making travel connections perfectly on time? God must be looking out for me. Schedules lining up, babies sleeping during nap time—all good things. Then difficulty comes knocking, and I assume God must hate me or at the very least has left me.

As one writer said “Like many other pieces of the long, complex narrative that tells of Israel’s wilderness sojourn, this story of thirst and testing has at its centre a critical question concerning God’s presence. How can we know if God is with us, more literally, “in our midst”? What signs or evidence do we use for discerning the presence and providence of God?” That can be incredibly difficult to answer. Quite simply, for the Israelites when their needs are met God is there and when they are in need he is gone. In some ways that is how it has worked to this point. Trapped at the edge of the Red Sea they cry out to God and the waters part while they escape over dry land. When they do not have water or food God sends manna and quail to meet their needs. What they have failed to realize is that through that process they should have begun to trust in God to be there for them. Instead of murmuring and being afraid they should have trusted in God to lead them safely and prayed for their needs. Instead whenever the going gets tough they bail, they look for something tangible like a golden calf. Things tend to feel much safer when we can point to tangible things. The Israelites have a bad habit of misplacing authority.

When they wanted water, they complained to Moses and they expected him to fix it. They forgot that it was not Moses who called them out of slavery and promised a land flowing with milk and honey. They forgot that it was not Moses who parted the water or, caused the manna and the quail to fill their empty stomachs. It was God who called them, led them, and kept them safe. It is easy when we are afraid, to look to the things we can control or tangibly experience to keep us safe. We saw it happen this week. “If I can get enough of what I need

to be safely tucked away at home then I will be okay, I will have done all I can do.” Knowing we have a pile of canned goods, or toilet paper or whatever it is can make us feel safe. That is a natural human response. That is exactly how the Israelites responded. Do you remember when God provided manna to them? They were only allowed to collect enough for that day. If they tried to collect more for the next day it spoiled. They had to get up every morning and trust that God would meet their needs for that day. It must have been difficult.

I am certainly not suggesting that it is not good for us to prepare either just don't let fear drive you. Let love, concern for yourself and others, and compassion inform all you do. Allow yourself to see God in the world and in the lives of those around you. And when we feel afraid, we pray for the courage to react like Moses did who was not only contending with his own fears and doubts but also that of an entire nation. When Moses and his people are facing an impossible situation, he does not try to solve it himself. Instead he turns to God and prays a simple, honest, prayer outlining his fears and anxieties. Then God reminds him they have everything they need, he has the staff that he struck the Nile with, he needs to trust God and to use it.

While it would be wonderful to have a staff like that in today's world, we still have the tools we need to keep ourselves and those around us safe and provided for. We know the best practices that we should be using, and we have the ability to help care for those around us. Whether it is dropping off groceries or medications to those who are more vulnerable, putting a card in the mail or, phoning people you know who might be feeling more isolated or afraid. Perhaps it is offering up a prayer when you feel uncertain. We trust that God is among us and is the ultimate authority. I have complete faith in you and know you already doing all these things.