

**Sermon “The Promise at the End of it All”****Kirk of St James****Sunday March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2026****Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

If you had told me, that in the week I was away in Winnipeg there would be a complete unraveling in the Middle East I would have found it difficult to believe, yet here we are. These days it feels like we move from uncertainty to uncertainty longing for the days that are precedented as opposed to unprecedented—where it feels like we have lived since the pandemic. We have come to understand unknowns, anxiety and uncertainty in new ways over the last six years.

When we arrive at this story in Exodus dealing with the grumbling of the Israelites some leaders use it as an opportunity to point out their frustrations with their congregations. “If only these stiff-necked people would listen to me, I am leading them through the wilderness” or some variation on that theme. I find that frustrating because it suggests that it is always the congregation and never the leadership. That being a church simply means falling in behind one person, and it isn’t a collaborative, living, breathing, learning, growing group of people working to follow the call of God together. So, we certainly are not going to go the beleaguered leader route today, although I will say this—if there are ever areas you feel we need to improve, or you want to stop by my office and raise concerns or, share ideas please do. I have not and will not always get things right and my door is always open--ensuring we are in conversation about things is important.

I believe things like grumbling and quarreling like we see in Exodus today comes from a place of fear which points to an even deeper issue—they do not know if they can trust God. The Israelites require 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 were 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. Going back to the pandemic do you remember countries like Australia had to hire security guards to patrol the toilet paper aisles? Fear is a chaotic driver at best.

The struggle for the Israelites is that while they are travelling through the wilderness, they have virtually 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.

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.”

Here is the crux of the matter, time and again God has rescued them, and over time and through that process one would hope their relationship would grow. Instead of murmuring and being afraid we would hope by this point they have a measure of trust, yet once again they melt down. It is an exhausting cycle. If we were to take a moment to break this down, we could see how things like this happen. When the Israelites find themselves up against very real concerns (water is far more concerning than toilet paper) they panic, which is a natural human response. We look at what we have on hand, and we try to figure out what we are going to do. Moses, caught in the middle must be at his wits end. He is not insensible to the lack of water; however, he also knows that God has been providing.

I have been wondering about this, pondering it as I look at my own faith and my own struggles. The Israelites do not understand what it means to be loved by God—it has not been a message they have been able to internalize. They constantly waver between faith and fear—what if God only takes us so far but then abandons us? What do we do then? We all face these moments in our life. My dad struggled with cancer for over ten years. Sometimes I had faith and sometimes I didn’t, and sometimes I wondered how we would get through, and then a new challenge would come up, and it was like starting all over again because we had gotten to this

point but now it was a totally new thing and would we make it through? And then the miracle we hoped for didn't happen, but somehow in the end God gave us the grace to endure. You have likely all had your own experiences much like the Israelites. I don't know about you but for me it is the fear that God isn't going to be there when I need them most. The Israelites had no water yes, but the real fear there is that God would not be there for them. The funny thing is? That pretty much sums up our faith. Learning to trust and believe even when it feels impossible.

Our world is currently facing uncertainty, and that is both scary and anxious. On top of that we might be struggling with things in our personal lives that feel much the same. We just don't know how they are going to turn out, and we worry and we wonder. How does God and how does our faith and how it impacts our lives affect how we move through the world? In this passage both Moses and the people give insight into how we might respond.

The first is voicing our fear. When we are afraid, when we are worried, we name it aloud. We don't want it to fester in our lives. Which is where the actions of Moses are important to note. When Moses is faced with a monster of a problem one of the first things he does is pray. It was a brief, humble, frightened prayer, which gives voice to both his fear and the challenge. Then together Moses and the elders act in faith. We might go through ups and downs in our lives as frequently as the freeze thaw cycle of a Canadian winter, no life is immune to that reality. However, we live in a community that can lift us up when that happens, that grieves with us when we are sad, that offers comfort when we are afraid, and who can also remind us that we are deeply loved by God on the days we are unable to feel ourselves.