

### *Covenant of Sustenance*

The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the Lord commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people argued with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?" But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?"

So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel's elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd's rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. I'll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink." Moses did so while Israel's elders watched. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the Lord, asking, "Is the Lord really with us or not?"

Ex. 17:1-7 (C.E.B.)

My guess is we all hear ourselves in the complaining and the grumbling of the Israelites. We can imagine our own voices raising their concerns. It seems we almost *like* to complain about things. We especially like to complain about the weather:

- "It's too windy."
- "I'm tired of the cold."
- "I can't wait until summer."

And then when summer comes, we hear things like:

- "It's too hot."
- "I wish it would rain."
- "I can't wait until it turns cold!"

We not only complain about the weather, we also complain about politicians and the economy and health insurance. We grumble about noise and traffic and urban sprawl. We whine about the price of eggs and the lack of affordable day care.

Sometimes I wonder if we *can't* be happy unless we have something to complain about. In that sense, we are very much like the people of Israel who complain to Moses.

Did you notice that this place in the wilderness is remembered, not as a place where God provided, but where the people complained (Ex. 17:7, see also Ps. 95:8)? And this isn't the only time they complain.

"But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us' (Ex. 17:3)?"

I have to confess. Every time I hear the people complain to Moses by saying, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt" (Ex. 17:3), I think of the pastor who referred to this as the "Back to Egypt Committee." And almost every church has one.

Its members are the ones who always say "we've never done it that way before," as a way of saying we can't try something new. Or they say things like "I remember when our church did . . ." or "I remember when our church was . . ." whatever they long for in the past. It's the Back to Egypt Committee.

As I thought about it, I realized I've not met members of that committee here at Hope – at least not yet. Maybe they haven't met for a while. I don't know.

What I do know is Moses had to contend with this committee several times already (Ex. 14:11, 16:6, 17:3).

- The first time, they complained about being caught between an army and the Red Sea, so God parted the sea to let them through.
- The second time, they complained about food, so God provided manna.
- This time they complain about being thirsty, so God provides water.

When I originally conceived of this series of sermons, I wasn't sure there was a covenant at work in this setting. But I quickly realized God was providing sustenance. That may be more obvious with the manna than with the water, but there is a Covenant of Sustenance at work. God is going to sustain us – even when we join the Back to Egypt Committee.

And that is good news, because I don't know about you, but I'm pretty good at finding things to complain about.

There are a couple of differences between our usual gripes and the complaints to Moses, though.

The people are not just thirsty. They are thirsty and there is no water to be found. It is quickly becoming a life-threatening situation. And all they can think of is the ever-present water of the Nile River. No wonder they begin to argue about their leader's plans (Ex. 17:2-3).

When this story is told by the Psalmist, it is referred to by the place name, Massah and Meribah (Ps. 95:8). Like Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, it is a place with an unusual name. (I've always wondered what it would be like to live in one of those places.) But a reasonable translation of those Hebrew words might be Testing and Arguing, not exactly the kind of town I'd want to live in. Would you want to live in a town called Testing and Arguing, Kansas?

They were arguing with God and testing whether or not God could provide for them.

Now, I've heard about scientific evidence suggesting there are some unique rock formations in the Sinai Peninsula, where this story likely takes place (Ex. 17:1).<sup>1</sup> Those formations include rock walls where water seeps out, gathering to form streams and, eventually rivers. But the minerals in the water sometimes collect at the openings, shutting off the holes where the water once flowed. Moses may or may not know about these closed off water sources; but God knows they are there. All Moses has to do is break apart the mineral deposits to let the water flow again.

I like to imagine the water coming out of it is rather refreshing. Maybe even bottled water quality. You'd never be able to sell Nile River water – but this water certainly could be bottled! It is an amazing gift. The answer to their complaints is better than what they have been longing for.

Of course, it's also true that the answer to their complaints is already there. God's answer is just below the surface. All they have to do is trust God to provide and God will provide.

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<sup>1</sup> I could not locate the source for this suggestion.

As I said, the good news is that God doesn't punish us for complaining. God doesn't bring disaster upon the people for failing to trust in God's providence and care. God doesn't enter into an argument with them, either.

God simply waits. God waits until someone is ready to listen. God waits until Moses asks for guidance (Ex. 17:4). Then God speaks. Then God provides. That is when we see evidence of the Covenant of Sustenance.<sup>2</sup>

You see, God cannot be found in our complaining, though God is listening. God cannot speak when we are whining, though God is ready to guide us. God cannot meet our needs until we open our eyes and ears and hearts to allow God's grace to be seen and heard and received.

Sometimes we are too noisy with our complaints to hear God's still small voice. Sometimes we are so intensely concerned about our circumstances that we don't recognize God's sustaining presence in our midst. And sometimes we are whining about things we have the power and ability to change!

When Moses finally asks God for direction, God says to look at the tools at hand (Ex. 17:4). "You have your staff, the staff you used to part the Red Sea, the staff you used to bring terror to Pharaoh. Use it again" (Ex. 17:5).

This story is a reminder that God is meeting our needs. First with manna, now with water. God's Covenant of Sustenance is at work.

This is the third covenant we've explored during Lent. In each, God makes a promise as well as a demand. And in each, God fulfills the promise, even when we fail. There was the Covenant of Provision and the demand that human life be held sacred. Then we heard the Covenant of Land and the demand for obedience. In the Covenant of Sustenance, there is a demand to share.

That is most clear in the story of the manna, where we are reminded that there is enough for everyone (Ex. 16:17-18). Smaller families need less and get less than larger families.

The call for equity and sharing is embedded in the Law of Moses, the laws God gave to the people. They were reminded that there is always enough.

We often remember when Jesus tells the Disciples that there will always be the poor, but they will not always have him (Mt. 26:11). They were complaining about spending money needlessly, rather than celebrating the generosity being displayed. But we don't always remember that Jesus is referring to the command to share. Here is what the full text says:

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'

Dt. 15:11 (NRSV)

In other words, the Covenant of Sustenance is not for us to keep, but for us to share.

That may be the underlying assumption behind other Biblical stories we know, but we have never – or at least rarely – placed them in that context.

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<sup>2</sup> Craddock, p. 163.

- Think, for instance, about the story of the widow who shares a meal with Elijah. She thought it was going to be her last meal, and yet she finds a way to share it (1 Kgs. 17:12). And as we know, she is blessed because she shares what little she has.
- Or think about the boy who was willing to share his lunch, only to have Jesus bless it and multiply it and feed 5,000 people with it (Jn. 6:9).

Could it be that both of those stories are built upon the layers of understanding about the importance of sharing what we have? Is it really a response to the Covenant of Sustenance? Is it faith lived out, by taking action rather than finding something else to complain about?

God provides all we need. And, in fact, God provides more than we need. Out of our plenty, we are invited to share. And in that sharing, we participate in the Covenant of Sustenance by providing what someone else needs.

In many ways, that is exactly what we do each month on Sandwich Saturday. We share the plenty we have in order to provide for others who do not have as much as we do. We do that by making lunches and serving lunches to people who gather every Saturday for a meal. Certainly some people are afraid that the system is being abused by some of the guests. But the command to share does not place requirements on the recipients; it only requires generosity on the side of the givers.

Or think of the work done by Numana, providing meals for people in need.<sup>3</sup> They see their purpose as helping people like us share with people in need across the globe by providing a place to put together food kits.

I also think about Chef José Andrés and his World Central Kitchen.<sup>4</sup> He works with local restaurants and international partners to provide free hot meals for refugees and survivors throughout Ukraine and the surrounding countries. Chef Andrés has been quoted as saying, “When you talk about food and water, people don’t want a solution one week from now, one month from now. The solution has to be now.”

My guess is no one receiving food at his kitchens complain about the food. They are simply grateful for food to eat and water to drink.

In some ways, Chef Andrés is repeating the miracle Moses performs at Massah and Meribah. He is responding to the Covenant of Sustenance and sharing what he has. He does that with what he has at hand, using local kitchens and cooks in the same way that Moses uses his staff.

My challenge to you is to go and find a way to do the same, to receive the Covenant of Sustenance with thanksgiving, and to share what you have received with others.

Maybe we can change the name of our town, changing it from Testing and Arguing to Receiving and Sharing. I think I’d love to live in that town. Wouldn’t you?

Randy L Quinn  
Hope Mennonite Church

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<sup>3</sup> [www.numanainc.com](http://www.numanainc.com)

<sup>4</sup> [www.wck.org](http://www.wck.org)

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