

GOD HAS TAKEN THE HIT FOR HIS PEOPLE'S SINS

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church on this seventieth day before the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord:

"Behold, I will stand before your face there upon the Rock in Horeb; and you shall cause to strike (the) Rock, and water will come out from it, and the people may drink." And Moses did thus before (the) eyes of (the) elders of Israel.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

As a matter of practice, the Church in this place prays with Jesus. She does so four times in any given week in the prayer He gave when asked, by His followers, how to pray. On weeks with special feast days, funerals, or weddings, she prays with Jesus more in the words He has given. Whether you individually are here for each of those Lord's services, or not, the prayers of His Church, for His people and the world continue. In reality, each time you pray the "Our Father" you offer the sacrifice of prayer with Jesus and His Church throughout the world.

Today, without limiting the teachings contained in today's readings, we may discover the Word's basis for and reinforcing of the fourth and sixth petitions of the Lord's Prayer. As just mentioned, we pray, "give us this day our daily bread, "and, "lead us not into temptation" regularly. As we do so, the Holy Spirit works in the words by joining our thoughts to the mind of Jesus, even as we speak to the Father His Words.

In the Old Testament reading today, you heard declared, for a third time in the history of the Exodus, the record of Israelites offering petitions, prayers if you will, of complaint against Moses. In time, not even three months had passed since the company

¹Exodus 17:6

of Israel had been led out of Egypt by Moses, and the shining, bright, fiery cloud of God's Real Presence. This third time of grumbling against God, and His chosen shepherd, echoed the people's first complaint – about lack of water – which had just occurred three days after the Lord brought them through the Yam Suph! What was their gripe?

The people found fault with Moses, and they said to him, "You give water to us, and we (will) drink!" Then Moses caused to say to them, "Why do you find fault with me; why do you tempt the YHWH?"²

Almost 1,500 years before God-in-our-flesh gave His people the words of the Lord's Prayer, God's people, who had been witnessing powers, wonders, and miracles which brought about their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, demanded their daily bread and tempted the Lord. They had already been led past bitter waters into a beautiful oasis. God had given them the "bread of angels." God was continually watching over them, caring for them, protecting them. Yet they complained.

It is as if they were routinely possessed of the American spirit which says, "What have you done for me lately?" Think about this for a moment: if you had been in that company of the thousands whom God had rescued from slavery; who had been given gold and precious items to leave captivity; who had seen God rescue them from their mortal enemies in the waters of the Sea, would you have joined your voice to those complainers, on day 3, day 15, and just before the end of the third month of your rescue?

Well, if you believe that which you confessed right after this Lord's service began, you would have. This is a reality: you have here available, three to four times a

² Exodus 17:2

week at a minimum, more of God's Presence than those cranky Israelites had. You have God speak His Word of forgiveness into your ears, through human means, as did the Israelites, who heard God through Aaron. You have a font standing here, filled with water. That is meant to be a visible and present reminder of how God chose to deliver you from the full and complete bondage to sin in which you were conceived. You have God's Real Presence come into your mouths. Here the Body and Blood of Jesus veiled under earthly means of bread and wine touches you. You have God's means of grace to defend you from true evil – that which attempts to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And you, like the people of God of old, complain. You grumble against your leaders who administer His Word to you. You gripe about not getting quickly enough that which you think you need for this body and life. You moan about God's gifts to you – the friends and family who have given you some offense. You grouse about any number of the provisions God gives you for this body and life, even as you pass by, through, and into His means of grace each week. For those things and so much more, you need to hear God say to you through Moses and Aaron's offices the same thing He said to His people three and a half millennia ago:

"Why do you find fault with me; why do you tempt the YHWH?"

That is the Law, and it hurts to hear it. But, it is needed that you may not fully fall into temptation to remain in doubt about God's gracious provisions for you, for us, for all people. Today, as you petition God to grant us our daily bread, you are called

to remember that God provides for the daily needs of all people, even to wicked people, without your prayer. You are free to understand that Jesus uses His Words in His prayer, offered back to Him from our lips, to keep you aware of his gifts, that you might receive your daily sustenance with thanksgiving.

You, we, the people of God, can remember those things because we hear, know, and believe God has given us, and continues to give us, His forgiveness. Today, His gracious, forgiving will is declared in that which He did for those grumblers long ago. He heard their third complaint, and He paid the price to give to them that which they did not deserve! That day, God whose glorious power was on display night and day, God chose to serve His people – that He might again turn them from their sins! Hear again the people’s specific complaints:

And the people thirsted there for water, and the people caused to murmur against Moses, and caused to say, “Why here did you cause to bring us up from Egypt to kill me and my sons, and my cattle, by thirst?”³

They speak as one. They blame God’s messenger. They declare him to be the cause of their misery. And, in so doing, they blame God.

God’s people, once again, seem to long for the security of slavery. They hunger for routine, for the time when they felt no need to trust in God in their misery. They cry out for the suffering that is past, testing their shepherd, and thus testing God. Moses responds with the words many a pastor of God’s people has echoed:

“What shall I do with this people, they almost stone me!?”⁴

³ Exodus 17:3
⁴ Exodus 17:4b

In our day and age, that leader of God's people might have received a prescription for anti-depressants, or a mandatory sabbatical leave. In that day, God gave to Moses that which He still wills to do for His faithful aching shepherds who remain open to His Word. That Word says:

Then YHWH caused to say to Moses, "Pass before the face of the people, taking with you (some) from the elders from Israel, and (the) rod which you caused to strike the Nile with it, take it in your hand and go."⁵

God tells an aching leader of His people to get to work. While it may not be evident to you in the text, the position God tells Moses along with some of the elders of the people, to take is the place of servants in that era. Moses – worried about his own safety in the face of the Israelites grumbling against him – is called to take a position of servant before the people. The word order, and its construction, indicates that he and the other leaders were to stand before their master – who on this occasion was an erring congregation – and prepare to let God work through them to bring His gifts, His grace, to His people.

In our day, for a pastor aching over the complaints of God's people in a particular place, that man is called to stand before the people. He is to let God do His work through him. He is to be faithful and give them that which they really need – Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of their sins (just as Moses was about to prefigure). God places his men, His ministers who are in danger from His people, before them, and then God stands before those men, as our text declares:

⁵ Exodus 17:5

“Behold, I will stand before your face there upon the Rock in Horeb; and you shall cause to strike (the) Rock, and waters will come out from it, and the people may drink.” And Moses did thus before (the) eyes of (the) elders of Israel.⁶

To Moses and the elders who are to take the place of servants before the face of the people, God now says He will take the place of the Servant before them! It truly helps our generation to understand the ancient practices that are reflected and illumined by this event. God’s ministers stand before His sinning people as servants, and God Himself stands before the ministers as Servant. Just what kind of servant does God display Himself to be?

He is one who does not lead His people into temptation. God guards and keeps them so that the devil, the world, and even their own sinful flesh do not lead them into false belief, unbelief, and complete lack of hope in His promises. He stands before His people, before their leaders, and He gives them that which they need – even when they do not deserve it – and even when they, when you, deserve nothing but death and destruction on account of their grumbling, their sins against Him.

Today’s texts are about the grace of God for graceless, complaining, grumbling sinners. They are for all who would be called the people of God. They are for you at your worst moments. Hear again what the Servant of the servants willed to do, wills to do, for His erring people:

“Behold, I will stand before your face there upon the Rock in Horeb; and you shall cause to strike (the) Rock, and waters will come out from it, and the people may drink.” And Moses did thus before (the) eyes of (the) elders of Israel.⁷

⁶ Exodus 17:6

⁷ Exodus 17:6

God says what He will do for those who are in danger of perishing in their sins of doubt about His gracious provision for their daily needs. He says that His minister, Moses, is to strike the Rock upon which God's Presence will stand in service to His people. That sounds fairly simple, does it not? Here is the order of deliverance that day: Moses and Elders before the sinning people of God; God's Presence before them on the Rock; the Rock is struck and water flows. If there is any doubt in your mind about what this all ultimately means, God through the inspired words of St. Paul declares:

And all the same spiritual Drink drank: for they all drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them; and the Rock was Christ.⁸

The Rock which is struck is Christ! From Him come the waters of life, of forgiveness, of grace. The minister, trembling with frustration and perhaps fear for his life at the hands of the people he was leading under God's direction, drives the rod of deliverance onto the Rock.

That is the blow the people deserved for doubting God and His Word. There was the staff that God had once turned into a snake (a minister of death, and the symbol of the foe of Eve's offspring). There was the rod that God used in Moses' hand to turn the waters of Egypt to blood (turning that which was needed for life into that which carried death). The leader's rod, at YHWH's command, brings forth living water from the Rock, who is Christ.

⁸ I Corinthians 10:4.

The Son of God, Who you know to be Jesus, took, almost fifteen centuries before he came in our flesh, Jesus took the blow of the wrath of God for the benefit of His people. In a foreshadowing of that which will be recalled again as Lent ends, Christ was struck for the sins of His people, for the anguish of those whom He called to lead them into the Promised Land. Christ is struck, and God's people are given life anew.

From the Promise given to Eve in the Garden after the Fall of Adam, the blow is now struck. There, Christ received the punishment His people deserved on account of all their sins. Centuries later, in the fulfillment of that which was prophesied in this action, the full wrath of God was poured out on the Christ, in our flesh, bearing our sins.

Then, as He who had been beaten for His people's transgressions, who had been struck into death for your sins, then, again, and for all time, God's true life-giving water flowed. From the strike of the soldier's spear, blood and water flowed down. He gives His life to give life.

That is the glory of God's grace hung for you to behold in your sins. There is your glory of forgiveness, and life, and the price God paid in full for you and all people. That glory of God is held forth that all sinners might behold the payment God made for them, for you. God in Christ has taken the hit for His people's sins.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Septuagesima (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

Exodus 17:1-7; I Corinthians 9:24-10:5; Matthew 20:1-16

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Pastor Michael H. Merchonise

Soli Deo Gloria

And all (the) congregation of (the) sons of Israel moved on from (the) Wilderness of Sin, by stages, upon (the) command of YHWH and they camped in Rephidim; and there was no water for the people to drink.⁹

Then the people found fault with Moses, and they said to him, "You give water to us, and we (will) drink!" Then Moses caused to say to them, "Why do you find fault with me; why do you tempt the YHWH?"¹⁰

And the people thirsted there for water, and the people caused to murmur against Moses, and caused to say, "Why here did you cause to bring us up from Egypt to kill me and my sons, and my cattle, by thirst?"¹¹

So cried Moses to YHWH to say, "What shall I do for this people, they almost stone me!"¹²

Then YHWH caused to say to Moses, "Pass before the face of the people, taking with you (some) from the elders of Israel; and your rod which you caused to strike the Nile with it -- take it in your hand and go."¹³

"Behold, I will stand before your face there upon the Rock in Horeb; and you shall cause to strike (the) Rock, and water will come out from it, and the people may drink." And Moses did thus before (the) eyes of (the) elders of Israel.¹⁴

Then he called the place's name Masah and Meribah, upon (the) fault-finding of (the) sons of Israel, and upon their temptation of the YHWH to say, "Is YHWH among us or not?"¹⁵

⁹ Exodus 17:1

¹⁰ Exodus 17:2

¹¹ Exodus 17:3

¹² Exodus 17:4

¹³ Exodus 17:5

¹⁴ Exodus 17:6

¹⁵ Exodus 17:7