

Willow River Parish**Title: Beyond Thirst****Scripture Lesson: Exodus 17:1-7 (NRSV)**

¹ From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Good morning Church! The scripture reading we read today is deeply related to water. Water is indispensable to all living things. About seventy percent of the earth's surface is covered in water. Water also consists seventy percent of the body. The cradle of civilization began around the riverside. When scientists look for signs of life on planets outside the Earth, they look for signs of water. It is rain that can extinguish wildfires in dry areas such as the west coast in the United States. The fetus grows in the mother's amniotic fluid. Baptism means born again in Christ, symbolically the water is used. I am not sure if you have ever fasted before. I have an experience about prayer with fasting for three days. Back then, I did not eat any food, but I drank

water with salt to sustain my life. Human beings can endure more than forty days without food, but it is hard to endure more than three days without water. All life on Earth cannot live without water. Like this, water symbolizes life.

According to today's scripture lesson, after the Israelites had crossed the Red sea, they journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin as the Lord commanded and camped at Rephidim. (1) The bible describes the Israelites followed God's order, but they didn't still trust God. For us who read the Bible, we don't understand their distrust of God because they experienced a lot of miracles, grace, and love of God while escaping Egypt. They experienced many miracles, but life in the wilderness was not easy. No matter how many miracles God has shown and protected them, they did not think that God could help them in places where only soil and stones are visible, hot during the day, cold at night, and no food or drink like a desert. The life in the wilderness they faced was an uncertainty itself. They were very thirsty because they couldn't get water, but there was no place to get water in their sight.

As the Israelites failed to slake their thirst, they eventually began to blame God and Moses. In fact, it is not the first time that they complained and blamed God and Moses. In the wilderness of Sin, just before coming to Rephidim, they blamed God and Moses for their hunger. Then God promised to provide them manna and quail for food (Exodus 16:12). The promise lasted for forty years in the wilderness. They thought God fed them at that time, but this time it seemed that even God could not slake their thirst because all they could see was soil and stones. All they could do was complain to God and Moses for water to drink. They often complained against Moses' leadership, and this time again they asked, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (3)

Today's scripture lesson shows the problems Israel had. They had no faith. Their distrust was expressed through resentment, complaints,

quarrels, and doubts. But what can be done with resentment, complaints, disputes, and doubts? There's nothing. Even though they complain against Moses and God, the problems of their lives were not solved. How can they solve the problems? The way to solve the issues is to trust and rely on God, the problem solver, as they have experienced His grace, love, and miracles so far.

Unfortunately, they did not trust God and Moses, so they blamed God and Moses whenever they faced problems of their lives. Moses had no ability to solve their thirst. All he could do was say, “Don’t quarrel with me,” and “Don’t doubt God.” (2) Moses was afraid of being stoned by the people of Israel. Their grudges and complaints were very serious.

When the people of Israel lived as slaves in Egypt, their lives were miserable. They suffered from labor all day long, and those who could not stand it were abandoned under the treatment of useless things. Now they quarreled with Moses saying, “The lives in Egypt were better than now.” Complaints, disputes, fights, tests, and distrust are all caused by anxiety. They always experienced God’s power during the journey of liberation, but they still asked, “Is the Lord among us or not?” (7) They were always shaking, wandering often. It can be said that their hearts were dry spiritually before they feel thirst physically. Their thirst was caused by a more fundamental part. They were skeptical about their escape from Egypt following Moses as they faced a possible loss of their families and all their property. When their complaints were expressed collectively, it was like a riot.

Moses is just human like us, and how afraid he must have been of that? He cried urgently to the Lord, “What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.” (4) All he could do was pray to God. When the Israelites complained against God and Moses, Moses prayed with faith in God. His prayer came from the belief that God will listen to the appeals of His people and will save them from the sufferings.

Then, the Lord answered his prayer and said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” (6) The staff itself has no power, but when God uses it, even the ordinary staff turns into a capable staff. Moses struck down the rock at Horeb with his staff, as God commanded. Then, came the water that would resolve the complaints, fights, resentments, and fear Moses had. Beloved, what kind of God is our God? The Lord we believe in is the Lord of reversal who transforms the problems, pain, complaints, negative thoughts and emotions of our lives into happiness, peace, love, joy, positive thoughts and emotions. God is life.

The place where the people blamed and complained against God and Moses was called Massah and Meribah. Horeb was where Moses first met God when he was 80 years old. (Exodus 3:1) And this is the first place for the Israelites to appear. (Exodus. 19:11) Horeb is the place for God’s law, and God gave them water of life first. God makes a covenant through the water of life and further through God’s commandments.

Horeb means barren, desolate place. Horeb, also called Mount Sinai, was a wilderness among the wilderness. It was a place where people couldn’t expect to get water, and where they couldn’t see the future. However, God meets us at a wilderness of despair when we cannot expect anything because we do seek God when we are desperate. When we are not desperate, we try to solve the problem with our own strength. However, when we face a situation in which we cannot solve the problem by our ability, we pray earnestly to God.

Sometimes problems like the thirst the people of Israel suffered come into our lives. We often forget God’s grace because of the difficulties before our eyes. When we forget the grace, such complaints, grudges, disputes and distrust come to our minds. In that case, we may feel that

God is not with us, as the people of Israel felt. However, when we feel thirsty for life, it may be an opportunity to communicate with God. Beloved, what kind of God is our God? God is the God of love, the God of life, and the God of solution. The anxiety, complaints, and grudges that arise when faced with difficult situations are so natural. However, we are Christians and Methodists who believe in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. When we face the problems of our lives, we must confess to God our ignorance and incompetence and pray to God like Moses. May Willow River Parish members rely on God, trust to our Father, pray in every moment of our lives. Amen.