Water and Suffering

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Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

One of the things I notice when reading Exodus 17 is considering the situation of the Israelites just before the complain about the lack of water. Taking the story as told at its face value, these people have seen the ten plagues of Egypt (from which they were protected), they have passed though the water and seen the army of Pharaoh get drowned, the fiery pillar is leading them by night, and the pillar of smoke by day. They are being provided manna daily, and quails. They have even been provided water miraculously—at Marah, where God made bitter water sweet. But now they are very thirsty again, and they complain. Yes, God, but what have you done for us lately?

And, this situation doesn’t really surprise us. It seems a very human thing to do. We get used to wonders upon wonders (flying through the air! sending images and sound thousands of miles away! automatic routing for our cars! pooping indoors! food that doesn’t spoil! free education for all! antispeptic and pain-free surgery! sliced bread!). And then we complain about our hard lot. My download speed is too slow. This airplane is too crowed. Someone forgot the replace the toilet paper. This bread is stale. *I want more! This is un-ac-cep-ta-ble.*

Does this sound like you? It sounds like me. God forgive us.

The Psalm warns us:

95:8 Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,  
95:9 when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.  
95:10 For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways."  
95:11 Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."

In some traditions of a daily office, Psalm 95 is read or sung every morning, and so this reminder to not harden our hearts is repeated every time the day is started.

The passage in Romans reminds us that God uses even our sufferings to our good—that is, those things which are beyond our mere inconvenience, but the real difficulties of life. On the radio last night, I heard that Emmy Lou Harris wrote to Pete Seeger when she was young worrying that she would never be a folk singer because she hadn’t suffered. Seeger actually wrote her back to tell her not to jump a freight train looking for suffering; suffering would find her. And we all, even in the comforts of our world, have tasted of difficulties: health, death, divorce, bad relationships, the sorrows and horrors that others undergo.

But as I said, the passage in Romans reminds us that God even uses our suffering to our good:

5:3 We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,  
5:4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,  
5:5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Suffering can be part of the chain of our redemption: suffering, endurance, character, hope, the realization of God’s love.

Now, to be honest, we also know that, although God can and does use suffering for our good, suffering can just tear us down. It’s too simplistic to think the only reactions possible are hardening of our hearts and rejoicing in our sufferings. Sometimes the difficulties we undergo just tear us down. And, in the long run, as John Maynard Keynes said, we are all dead.

So, while it is a good and right and useful question to ask how we might learn patient endurance and better character through our difficulties, sometimes we really are about to die of thirst. And then the story of Jesus and the woman at the well reminds us that Jesus is the source of living water “gushing up to eternal life.” Jesus is the way *through* these difficulties—even, as it were, a short cut. We all die, but Jesus provides, to those who receive it, eternal living water, eternal life. He came as the Messiah and Savior of the world; the one who rescues us finally from the normal result of our lives: in the long run, we are all dead, but Jesus provides the means for eternal life: trusting him to bring us out of our brokenness into life. If you have never taken the first step to receiving Jesus’s offer to rescue you, do so.

In this season of Lent, some of us take on a minor difficulty, like a fast from something we normally and naturally enjoy, to remind ourselves of Jesus’s sacrifice (so we take it less for granted) and as a discipline to improve our endurance. Some of us take on refraining from things which are unhealthy. One of the most successful Lenten disciplines for me was to decide one year not to complain about a particular person in my life. In this Lenten season, be reminded that God is acting towards our good, and will bring to fruition God’s plan to save us completely, through our disciplines and even through our sufferings.

I remember a preacher once teaching on the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. He pointed out that when the disciples came back from the city with food, Jesus said he was not hungry; he was satisfied at that instance to have done God’s will and complete God’s work. My prayer for us this week is that we find such satisfaction in doing God’s will that we will be as satisfied and delighted as Jesus was after talking to the woman.