

“Is the Lord among us or not?”
 Reading from the Old Testament: Exodus 17:1-7
 Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 4:5-7

“Well, la te da! Aren’t You Mr. Sophisticated.” It was the first thought that crossed my mind as my son sauntered through the door with a bottle of Pellegrino sparkling mineral water. I’ve always thought of Pellegrino as a luxury reserved for A-list movies stars sitting in their breezy linen summer threads at an outdoor café in St. Tropez. If I’m in a restaurant and ask for water, and the waiter inquires, “What kind?” I’m thinking I’m in the wrong restaurant. So, here’s my camp-lovin’, earthy-scented son swilling what I picture George Clooney sipping during an interview with GQ. Pellegrino ... really? “Here,” he says. “Take a sip,” he says. Of course, I’ve still got that *Clash* song I mentioned two weeks ago stuck in my head. “Should I stay or should I go?” Should I sip or just say no? Taste it? Why not.

N! A! S! T! Y! What’s that spell? Nasty. It’s like champagne made without grapes. Mountain Dew without the mountain or the dew. I tasted something similar years ago; it was some mystery liquid they made me drink before a CT scan.

Pellegrino. Perrier. La Croix. Sparkling natural spring water. To be honest, I think I'd prefer chemically chlorinated pool water.

Water. What do I know? I was recently chastised for pouring tap water over ice instead of the filtered water from the refrigerator door.

...But the faucet fills the glass twice as fast! And yet, if you are hot enough and thirsty enough, like during a sweltering late Spring track practice or late Summer football practice, or a middle-aged grass mowing practice, a communal hose will work just fine.

Cool, clear, water. Dan and I, with throats burned dry and souls that cry for water. Cool, clear water.

Not a song that makes an appearance many playlists today. Sons of the Pioneers, 1941, a western-swing cowboy song about a man, his mule, and a mirage. Out in the hot desert where dehydration, heat haze, and refracted light rays play tricks on the eyes and minds of exhausted travelers ... well, and apparently their mules. "Don't you listen to him Dan. He's the devil not a man. He spreads the burning sands with Water. Cool clear water.

For three weeks now we've listened to the seemingly broken record of the Israelites whining. Always equipped with a flair for

drama, they assail their Holy Land Caravan tour guide with complaint upon complaint, claiming that unless Moses is already waving in the Fed Ex jets, their cargo bays sloshing with water containers, they will surely die. It gets a bit tiring after a while, doesn't it?

But, sometimes even the whiners have a point. One hundred hours. 4 1/6 days. I read this week that this is the estimate for how long your body can exist at average temperatures without access to some source of water. In the wilderness/desert of the Sinai Peninsula the temperature averages 82^o Fahrenheit in May and 91^oF in June, with highs of 95^o and 104^o respectively. With heat and sun exposure, the timeline for survival shrinks. One estimate says that at 90^oF, survival time with limited activity can easily be reduced by half.

“Now we're down to fifty hours. Exertion -- such as walking long distances in the day time, carrying one's belongings, tents, and small children, and wrangling livestock along the way, shortens the timeline further.” Under extremely hot desert conditions during, let's say, the journey of our carping Holy Land caravan, sustained high sweat rates can reduce the hours of survival time without drinking water to single digits. (Anathea Portier-Young *Working Preacher.org*)

So quickly, your context can change from disagreeable to dire. So quickly, the thin layers of civility and common purpose and mutual concern can be peeled away, exposing the raw infection of fear mixed with blame and desperation. “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?”

Maybe this time they weren’t just crying wolf. Maybe this time, theirs is a cry of desperation. “Is the Lord among us or not?” It would be unprecedented if in this life this question never enters your mind. In fact, it would be unprecedented if this question has not entered your mind on several occasions. Is the Lord among us or not? It would be unrealistic to assume this question is not on the minds of many, if not most of the people of Puerto Rico right now as they await desperately needed aid that is too slow in coming. Even vacation destinations are not immune to the threats to life in the wilderness.

You may never have crossed paths with the cowboy balladeer and Dan the mule out in the Arizona desert, but you know thirst. When eulogizing some friend or acquaintance, you may charitably say he or she had a “thirst for life,” which could be code for the person who is

windsurfing one weekend, climbing a mountain the next weekend, and touring European cathedrals the next.

Or, far too many obituaries these days use the term *thirst for life* in an attempt to put a smiley face on the tragedy of a life lost to opiates.

But we're not talking about folks emulating Richard Branson the jet-setting, airline-selling, island-owning, hot-air balloon flying, intercontinental-sailing billionaire here. Nor are we talking about the troubled kid in the neighborhood whose partying turned tragically to addiction as the quest for peer acceptance spiraled out of control. No, in the desert wilderness, thirst for life is about survival. The mayor of San Juan this week revealed a desperate thirst for the lives of her people. The distraught faces of family members standing beside the rubble of collapsed buildings in Mexico City where loved ones were last seen before the earthquake; they were helplessly thirsting for news of life. The frequent tear-streaked faces of mothers, sons, daughters, and siblings I pass in hospital hallways and elevators, their whispered conversations trying to digest and understand the strange medical terminology that describes a life hanging in the balance; The frightened child standing in the gap between parents embroiled in domestic

drama, pleading for peace – that’s the thirst in the desert. The Psalmist laments, “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.” The people cry, “Is the Lord among us or not?” You’ve asked the question even if you couldn’t bring yourself to articulate it.

The people are despairing. Moses is distraught. "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." Notice that Moses doesn't address the water question; he's worrying about getting stoned before the dehydration sets in, because from his vantage point, he is not seeing any “streams of living water,” but he is seeing plenty of rocks.

So, what does the Lord do? An airlift of Pellegrino? Blueprints for an aqueduct? The implausible cistern-flooding rainstorm? No. The Lord instructs Moses to look for signs of where water may collect, a place where in the goodness of God’s creation, water could possibly be found. “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.”

The rock at Horeb. Sound familiar? Where was Moses when God called him to go to Egypt and lead his people out of slavery? Exodus 3:1

– “Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.” Do you think Moses brought the sheep to the mountain for the view? “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.” Could it be that it finally dawned on Moses, “Oh, now I get it.”

Antoine de Saint Exupery said, “What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well.” As with the manna and quail, the miraculous deeds of God often consist of simple signs — a God who provides water from a mountain spring; a friend with a patient, listening ear; a companion not afraid to walk with you through the darkest valley; a bluebird reminding you that a lost love rests in peace; a book that turns the lights back on for your spirit; a warm meal waiting for you when you return home from the hospital. Each of these represents a drink of water for the parched soul or body. What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well. What reveals God’s grace are the subtle ways God helps us find the well.

The first Israelites to read this story, centuries later, would be

exiles in Babylon, having lost, through their indifference and sense of entitlement, the very land Moses' caravan was marching toward. These first readers would later be described with these words, "By the waters of Babylon we wept as we remembered Zion." In exile these readers had been asking the same question as their ancestors at Horeb and the same question that sometimes plagues you and me during our own experiences of wilderness. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Remembering God's deeds at Horeb, the prophet Isaiah would offer the dispirited exiles in Babylon a hopeful word that is no less relevant for us. "For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water ... they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." Similarly, Jesus offers hope to a troubled outcast at a well in Samaria, "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

By the grace and presence of God what makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well. May the Lord keep our eyes and our hearts open to see, receive, and share it. Amen.