

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY III
Ordinary Time: World Communion Sunday

Exodus 17:1-7

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Listen for the word of God.

Exodus 17:1-7¹

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. 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?" 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?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 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. 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. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Pastor Amy Roon

Please pray with me.

God:

Be in our hearts,

Be in our heads,

Be in our understanding,

Be in the words spoken and in the words heard. – Amen

I am reminded and if you read the stories as we are, if you were here last week, this story sounds familiar. Last week we were all gonna die in the wilderness, because there wasn't food. And then God provides food. And then this week were all that I the wilderness because there's no water; and God provides water. And before that, we were all gonna die in Egypt because God wasn't going to save us; and God saved us. If you see a pattern here, you should be familiar with all the other stories in the Bible – and with our stories of faith and of life, of facing a crisis and feeling that there is no way and then there becomes a way.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. 1989.

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I will never forget the day that Benjamin discovered the future. Everyone talks about how important it is to be present in the moment; and no one talks about how infants and toddlers can feel stuck there. No one is born with the parts of their brains that can remember and reflect on the past. Even neuro-typical brains develop this ability at a maddeningly different stage between – somewhere – the ages of one and a half and maybe five does it start to come on board. Children with non-neuro-typical brains will experience even more frustration with the world around them, because the basis of all learning is the ability to remember a piece of information you already noticed and apply it to a present situation. If your brain is only able to notice your present situation, your present situation will appear infinite, which is great when your present situation is one you *like*. It is disastrous the moment someone suggests that experience is over, because ending that pleasant experience will feel terrifying and any disappointment what you are *now* experiencing infinite – and that disappointment is an infinite catastrophe because apparently you cannot remember that you ever experienced happiness before, and you do not have yet in your brain the foundation of ingenuity and preparation that is imagination or, more simply put, the ability to remember a past experience, notice your present experience, and not be limited by either – but to imagine a future that could be different from both.

When two-year-old Benjamin was completely fixated on having the raspberry I just ate – not another raspberry from the pint container full of raspberries – we stayed stuck in that moment. I could not get him to understand that he could choose from *any* of the .. “Dear, It's not that you can't have raspberries but I already swallowed the one you wanted.” We were stuck. ... Until I took a raspberry and put it in my mouth and turned back and took it out for him! ... Because sometimes it requires learning on the parent's [part] not the child's to get through the moment.

For him of course raspberries were not something that grew on a bush and ripened each season and came back year after year. There wasn't even the experience of bounty, of the fact that we had a half flat in the kitchen. There was just the experience of the moment. So when four-year-old Benjamin was leaving preschool and trying with increasing desperation to get his mother to understand the dire urgency of her to get back around to the driver's seat to turn on the car so that he could put his window down – an urgency she failed to understand in time for him to wave to all of his classmates – and when in the midst of his utter despair about that present disappointment, I will never forget as he sobbed the question, "Can I do it tomorrow?" And I thought, Oh yes! Oh, thank God! Yes! Absolutely! Tomorrow can be different than this moment you're having right now. I cannot fix this moment, but we can do it differently tomorrow. And so that day marked the beginning of the end of the tyranny of constantly living in the present moment.

And I say "began to end", because it's a long process isn't it? And to be fair to toddlers everywhere and to very young children everywhere, it's a trap we *all* fall into over and over again. The Bible is full of these stories of people getting stuck in impossible situations and God providing a way out over and over and over again – often times in miraculous ways that reflect the gravity of the total stuckness of the predicament. So it's easy for us to roll our eyes in exasperation over the Israelites complaining *again* this week. It's easy to read the text and know a solution is coming that, of course, no, God did *not* in fact go to all the trouble of saving them only to have them die of thirst in the wilderness. But how often do we, who purport to study these text and reflect on what they might teach us, and still in any moment of distress or discomfort feel trapped in our present calamity. ... [We can have the demonstration to follow [baby crying] it's ... I hear you; I hear you. I felt like that this morning.] ... as if

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we have never experienced deliverance before, as if there are no more raspberries ever, as if there is no tomorrow bearing the possibility of being and doing things differently.

I know that I am feeling that and needing to remember it over and over again. The present news cycle [is] bringing me day after day a new calamity that feels like "how on earth could we possibly get unstuck from this?" When we've done it before, we're just tired and hoping we didn't have to do it again. This is not, in fact, the most unjust the world has ever been. So here is what I know to be true:

God does provide.
There is enough love.
There is enough food.
There is enough water.

What we always, always have is a distribution problem— and a problem of our desire not matching the provisions. ... A problem that our *desire* is not matching the provisions; a problem of our imaginations limiting what we can see as a solution.

As we consider what we need to pack for our journey and what we must leave behind, we must accept that it is not possible to pack and prepare for every need that will arise. Our bags would be far too heavy. The food would spoil. The water would spill. And so let us pack instead bags of trust – *trust* that God *is* ever creating a world of abundance. Let us pack acceptance – *acceptance* for the love and support and resources that come in unexpected, non-uniform ways. And let us pack imagination – the *imagination* to partner with God in weaving together our stories of past and present and hopes; imagination to see God in the face of the stranger and in the place of desolation; imagination to feel connection with those far away in physical distance or ideology.

When communion is served [today] – as this is (as one of our children said when he was younger – Roy DeMaagd – I will never forget it. Thank you Betsy for telling me) that this is the service "where we have snacks." We often offer the bread saying, "Bread for the journey."

May you take this bread this morning with the awareness of this ritual that binds you to people of faith who lived thousands of years ago; this ritual that binds you in faith and community with people all over the world; this ritual that binds you and helps you be aware of *this* moment of fulfillment, even as you may be inspired to make that moment possible for someone else to eat this bread and drink the cup as an inspiration for justice, for greater distribution to make it possible for all to eat, for all to be wholly present at the table, and to remember that we are limited neither by our past or our present and to build a new future together. – Amen

Note: In honor of World Communion Sunday, the Communion music was the hymn, so loved by children, "Jesus Loves Me, This I know". The Congregation sang the first and last verses in English. In the middle, three speakers in turn spoke the words of the hymn in other languages: Vanessa Lovejoy-Guron – Tagalog; Loyce Ong'udi – Swahili; and Gudrun Parker – German.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/11/08/2017