

¹O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
³For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
⁵The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

⁶O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
⁷For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

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

■ Psalm 95

I'm always asked how long it takes to put together a sermon. The usual reply is "anywhere from ten to twenty hours" depending on the text. Most of that time is spent in research, reading, and writing—all so that when the children are sent on and your attention is refocused, I don't make a mess of the Word of God.

I'm telling you this because this week as I combed through our lectionary reading, what tripped me up were the words we have just read in Psalm 95: "*O that today you would listen to His voice!*" It

was that word, *listen*, that held me from approaching this text like I have dozens of other sermons. I needed to take the time to pause and do just that: *listen*.

The 4th century theologian Athanasius of Alexandria once said that the rest of the Bible is God speaking to us; but the Psalms are what we say to God.¹ Since the Psalter is the prayerbook of the Bible, the task of reading them is not to squeeze them for scholarly information like wringing blood from a rock but instead, we are invited into a conversation where these words become our words and thus they shape the way we speak with God.

Though I might be able to do the scholarly thing and take apart a Psalm like a mechanic stripping down a car, this week I was instead challenged to pray through the Psalm, and to listen. Instead of leaping right into exegesis like I usually do, I took some time to dwell in the words of this prayer, making it my own. I thought about you, having spent the week in your homes and workplaces, and how you have come here this morning to worship together in the same way this Psalm begins. I thought about the burdens you bear, the hard things in your lives that never seem to get solved. I thought about how many of you might hear the whisper of God's voice to you today, but that in a half hour you might forget it. I filled myself with these thoughts in the presence of God, because this is what prayer is.

Yet as in every good conversation, there is a time to speak and then there is a time to listen. The invitation of the Psalm before us today is not just to listen, but also to *obey* that voice. As I tripped up on Meribah and Massah, I realized that although I can tell you a lot about the scholarly debate on the form and grammar of this text, I would be doing right but still be doing wrong. Despite

¹ "In the other books of Scripture we read or hear the words of holy men as belonging only to those who spoke them, not at all as though they were our own; and in the same way the doings there narrated are to us material for wonder and examples to be followed, but not in any sense things we have done ourselves. With this book, however, though one does read the prophecies about the Saviour in that way, with reverence and with awe, in the case of all the other Psalms it is as though it were one's own words that one read; and anyone who hears them is moved at heart, as though they voiced for him his deepest thoughts." -- Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter of St. Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria, to Marcellinus, concerning the Psalms*. Website Reference: <http://www.fisheaters.com/psalmsathanasiusletter.html>, first accessed March 5th, 2010

all the smart things I could say about this passage, I would not be doing as the Psalm was asking me to do: not to harden my heart.

In order for you to understand the significance of Meribah and Massah—“quarrelling” and “testing” in Hebrew—we will need to return to the story of Moses leading Jacob’s children up out of Egypt. A nation of slaves, they were released from bondage after Yahweh beat down Pharaoh and disarmed the powers that had oppressed them. When they had reached the desert, however, they began to complain, saying in Numbers 20 “*Why did you bring the LORD's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!*”²

Moses, in exasperation and anger, takes his staff and strikes the rock. Water gushes out and meets the thirst of the people and their livestock. At Meribah and Massah, the people of God quarreled with Yahweh and tested him, and that is why the place they grumbled is still called “quarrel” and “test”.

We might be tempted at this point to say that the lesson of Meribah and Massah is not to argue with or test God. But when we read the account of Numbers up until chapter 20 when this story takes place, we see that Israel had made a *habit* of doubting Yahweh, despite the fact that he performs daily miracles to keep his people alive in a dry and barren land. They have manna falling every day with the dew. They had quail come in by the thousands. They even had God’s glory-cloud descend upon the central Tent of Meeting! But still, they stamped their feet and rebelled. The real problem with testing and quarreling with God is not in the act of testing or quarreling—or even complaining!—it is in ceasing to believe that God is with us and for us even when thirst overtakes us.

² Numbers 20:4-5

Israel rebelled against God because they were afraid. “*Sure*,” they muttered under their breaths, “*he might have taken us out of Egypt in a flurry of miracles, but what has he done for us lately now that we are thirsty?*” I confess that I, too, am often afraid—so I quarrel and test God because at heart, I do not fully believe in His goodness. His existence, yes. His omnipotence, yes. His incarnation, death, and resurrection—yes, yes, yes! But when I’m in the desert and I find myself thirsty, I immediately grumble out of fear that I have been led this far to perish and not be redeemed after all. My default is not to glorify God in the desert places, but to curse Him, to wonder why He who ordained the course of the sun in the sky could not also have ordained that I should learn wisdom from unceasing pleasure and joy instead of learning from pain. Yet I also confess that I have nowhere else to go. Nothing else makes enough sense. I must push through and continue to trust. This is *my Massah and Meribah*.

As I prayed through this Psalm, my reflections took the shape of a downward spiral—usually a negative thing given that a toilet flush is also a downward spiral, but going into this Psalm and praying it through meant feeling as though I was going around in circles, but deeper, deeper all the time.

The first thing I realized was that thirst itself is not sinful. Though I might find myself in a place where I am thirsty, it is not wrong for me to feel that way. Thirst is a God-given discomfort designed to tell us when we need something we are not getting—water. For me to feel thirsty is normal, yet what I do with the thirst determines the stuff I am made of—and what I am being made into.

In response to their thirst, Israel hardened its heart. They turned from what they knew of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and chose to believe that the God who had acted mercifully towards them before now would just cut them loose to die of thirst. I’m often tempted to do the same thing: that despite the mercy shown to me I choose to believe the lie that I am not loved nor cared for.

I hesitate to say that I am in a desert of my own, though it certainly feels that way. It is more that I am partly in the desert but also at an oasis; living partly in shadow but partly in light, looking spiritually like a dappled pony or calico cat. And although last week we heard that we need not be afraid of the deserts we find ourselves in, I *am* afraid of these desert times because I don't know if I will be tempted beyond what I can bear and that I might harden my heart after all. And yes, I know Paul says in 1 Corinthians. But being as I am, I wonder if one day I might just stop believing in God's self-revelation as good, as loving, as merciful—or even as with me. This is my temptation at Meribah, where no water flows.

Yet the Psalm leads me deeper, past the jubilation and into the desert, where the implication is that by entering fully into the desert and continuing to trust in the goodness of God even as my thirst burns me, there is *rest* to be had. Israel did not enter God's rest because they constantly quarreled and tested God out of a lack of trust. The cure for this mistrust? Simple obedience. The Holy Spirit led Jesus into his desert, and Jesus obeyed even though he knew he would be tried there. I need to be led into the desert as Jesus was led into his own, to be tempted and tried—and to come out stronger not in myself, but in knowing what it means to suffer with Christ and to somehow attain to the resurrection.³

But trusting God is difficult for us. This is because we all have dealt with feelings of betrayal. Not everything has worked out the way we wanted it to. Some of our failures we can put on a lack of effort or acumen, but some failures we can't understand. And the nagging feeling at the bottom of our stomachs tells us we have no place to put our frustration except to lay our complaint at the feet of God. It's not as though we accuse God of having done these things, but when you don't know where to go with what you have, what choice have we but to lay it at the feet of the Almighty? He isn't to

³ Phil 3:10-11

blame; he makes no mistakes, but where else can we go with the accusation on our lips but to the one who could have kept the breaking from happening? The struggle to trust the one who hears our laments has a name: fear.

This fear is a significant thing, because fear is our paper shield against unpredictable pain or even death. We may find small ways to deny our fear, but what we must not do is ignore it, for fear is the soil that covers something precious. The famous preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes "*Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.*"⁴

When we are at Meribah and Massah, we can choose to remember the faithfulness of God and continue on in the belief that He intends our good, or we can believe the worst parts of ourselves and say that He has abandoned us. When we're in pain and our thirst becomes unbearable, we may be tempted to harden our hearts and refuse to lean on God's revealed goodness. But even though there is pain in the offering, this is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. We must learn to work through pain and anxiety and doubt, and let these things be transformed into a humble faith that confesses that God is who He says He is. It is this faith that leads us into the Kingdom. It is this faith that leads us into rest.

- 1.) How is God speaking to you today?
- 2.) How has trusting God led you to a place of rest?

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, Christian Century, March 4, 1998, page 229