

Like Water from Stone
Rev. Patrick C. Ward
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
September 27, 2020
Exodus 17:1-7

Is the Lord among us, or not?

In the name of God. **AMEN.**

Imagine Moses approaching the rock at Horeb this morning.

The Israelites are dying of thirst, fearing for their lives, and deeply angry with **him**. Moses himself is angry, and unlike the people, who are holding him accountable, he is arguing with **God**. His own fear is not dying of thirst, but by stoning.

Take the staff with which you struck the Nile, says God.

Take some of the elder with you, says God. Strike the rock.

So imagine Moses approaching the rock at Horeb this morning. God has promised to be standing there. In front of you, God has told Moses. On this rock.

Does Moses approach the rock of Horeb on his knees? Does he turn his eyes away, as he will later on in the Exodus story, hidden near Sinai by God in the cleft of the rock, God's glory then a possibly blinding and potentially fatal vision to behold?

Does he touch the rock gingerly, reverently with that staff? Are we talking gentle tap? Or furious full bodied swing?

Exodus doesn't tell us. "Moses did so," is all the Exodus reports this morning, "in the sight of the elders of Israel."

In my mind's eye, though, and in my mind's ear, I'm seeing splinters and hearing something like the crack of a bat. Moses, after all, will dub this place Massah and Meribah. Massah meaning trial and temptation. Meribah meaning quarreling. Anger in community. Anger with God. Deep fear. Flowing water.

I'm interested in that anger this week. Israel herself, like our own nation, is in a dry land. Israel and its leader are argumentative, angry, resentful and afraid. Is the Lord among us, or not?

That's what the Israelites ask, that's the question that will forever hang in the arid air at Massah and Meribah.

And it's in the air this week, here. Epic drought persists across the nation, from here in the Commonwealth to an American West consumed by wildfire. The imminent presidential election, the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the possibility of sudden transition in our highest court are a source of deep anxiety for many Americans. A ruling this week in Louisville in the death of Breonna Taylor has met with understandable rage and despair and raises, for the umpteenth time, urgent questions about the public safety of people of color in America. We passed this week the tragic milestone of 200,000 Americana deaths from Coronavirus.

Is the Lord among us or not?

Again and again the staff hits the stone. Nary, yet, a trickle.

How long o Lord how long?

That's how the voice of Psalm 13 frames it for these in-between times. Times that seem too much to bear. Times that overwhelm.

You know, one of the losses of 2020, a death that did not, for every understandable reason, garner the notice it might have in a normal calendar year, was the death on May 27 of playwright and AIDS activist Larry Kramer.

I've been thinking of Kramer this week, because Massah and Meribah, the region of trial, temptation and quarreling, was Larry Kramer's native soil.

It seems like ancient history now to many of us, but between 1981 and 1996, roughly, there was a mass death experience of young people in America.

And because the majority of the dying were gay men or people of color, the medical, media and political establishments looked away for as long as they could.

In the midst of all of this, Kramer was a ferociously outspoken loner, a disruptive stray dog. He pointed fingers. He named names, and not simply the names of popes and Republican presidents. He would refer to Barbara Streisand as a hypocrite, and would assail Democratic party leaders as asleep at the switch.

He called the gay community to task for what he saw as risk-laden norms and reckless behaviours. "AIDS was allowed to happen. It is a plague that need not have happened," he told a reporter towards the end of his life.

“It is a plague that could have been contained from the very beginning.”

Kramer had no use whatsoever for organized religion. But I understand his rage to be rage in the service of human flourishing. So I root him at Massah and Meribah. Personally, I place him in line that arcs from Moses to Jeremiah to Amos and Hosea. He struck the earth with the rod of his mouth.

One of the organizations he founded, ACT UP, is credited with having changed US Public health policy, pharmaceutical protocols, and the public perception of people with AIDS. “Some reporter called me ‘the angriest gay man in the world’ or some such. Well, it stuck, but I realized it was very useful,” said Kramer once. “By nature, I’m an optimistic person. No one believes it, but I am.”

I think it’s that very combination – anger and optimism – or what we would understand as anger and *faith* – that roots Kramer for me this morning at Massah and Meribah.

There is an ancient Christian tradition that places wrath among the seven deadly sins. Our actual scriptures, however, have a far more nuanced view of anger and its role in the life of the spirit.

At Massah and Meribah, both the people and Moses are in desperate situations of crisis. The people believe they will die of thirst.

Moses believes he is about to die at the hands of the people. Their anger is rooted not in will to power, but in fear for life and in a longing for human flourishing.

It’s common for commentators to diss and dismiss the Israelites in the desert, because at this point in the Exodus they have already passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea. They’ve already been provisioned with daily servings of manna, and at an earlier stop along the way watch as Moses made a brackish pool of water potable by tossing a piece of wood into it at God’s bidding.

What I’d like to suggest this morning though is that we allow them their anger. Hunger and thirst have left them no choice. And their demonstration of anger is what leads them, it seems, to Massah and Meribah, where the rock opens and the water flows, and where community is restored.

God is not responding to a perceived lack of faith. This is a God, at Massah and Meribah, who instead responds to need. That the need has been opened to God in anger doesn’t matter. Massah and Meribah suggests, on the contrary, that there is a

kind of anger, there is a kind of complaining prayer – we call it lament – that is part and parcel of reverent life with God.

“Is the Lord among us or not” the Israelites want to know.

“Yes” insists Hebrew scripture, certainly. But not in ways that will necessarily suit us, or calm us, or make themselves clear to us. The anger of the Israelites this morning, like the anger of Larry Kramer,

Overlaps with the purposes of God because it reveals a yearning for human health, for human solidarity, for human flourishing.

It suggest for me personally a set of questions about the anger I carry myself. Is my anger life-giving? Or is it creating victims? Does does my anger swell my own sense of righteousness, blocking me from absorbing new information or opposing perspectives? Does my anger silence others, taking up all the air in the room and leaving others gasping for breath? Or is my anger in the service of something greater than my own advantage?

Perhaps one lesson from Massah and Meribah this morning, as we hear the crack of a staff against stone, as we imagine this magical outflow of God’s grace, is this. Anger can kill. Or anger can make the world new.

Let us pray.

Loving god, we pray to you from a parched place. Work in us the power of your creative love so that our thoughts and actions, in anger or in peace, may build your kingdom and serve only your justice. AMEN.