

“Strike Rock”
Exodus 17:1-7
Andrew Foster Connors
World Communion Sunday
October 1, 2017

Whenever our family travels, I usually handle accommodations which is surprising since those accommodations have caused a fair amount of whining and complaining. There was the hunting shack in Montana featuring empty mounted animal heads on the walls and crushed beer cans scattered across the floor. “We’re here for Glacier Park, not for the accommodations” I reminded them as one of my kids complained that some wild donkeys that showed up in front of the cabin were making it difficult to get to the car. “Quit complaining,” I told her. “Dealing with an unexpected ass or two is good life experience.”

There was the dirty motel in NC that I got for \$39 for the night. “We’re staying here?” one of the other 3 asked. “We’re only here for like 6 hours,” I said, “and we’re not even conscious for most of that time. When you wake up you’ll have a free breakfast to look forward to and at \$39/night, I just know it’s going to be spectacular.” There was so much whining about that place that the next year I splurged and we stayed in a stranger’s basement. They even had cable! It was cushy, but nothing’s too good for my family.

There was the yurt we stayed in this summer – the composting toilets were just a short distance through the woods – what else could you ask for? And there was the covered wagon on Laura Ingalls Wilder’s land in South Dakota that was really fun until the smoke detector malfunctioned in the middle of the night. Who knew that covered wagons had smoke detectors?

There’s usually at least one story like this every summer with some whining from somebody in the family and yet, the most remarkable thing is that I haven’t been fired from the job. It’s like they’ve learned that it’s best to let someone else do the planning so you can preserve your ability to complain about how it’s done. And the whining has become less shrill, almost a pleasant kind of whining. It’s like they all know that if we actually stayed somewhere nice, they’d miss out on the opportunity to complain about something which brings its own kind of pleasure.

The people in the wilderness have it a million times worse than anyone in our family, of course. The people complained about hunger in last week’s text. They complain about not having anything to drink this week. These are not trivial complaints. But this only accentuates my point. Moses doesn’t get fired. And he doesn’t quit. It’s like the people and Moses get comfortable with the roles they’ve occupied. The people get accustomed to complaining to Moses. Moses gets good at complaining to God about the people, and complaining to the people about whining to him instead of God.

And I wonder if God likes God’s role, too. I know that’s not exactly conventional wisdom. Tradition holds that it took 40 years in the wilderness for the people to be ready for the kind of trust they would need to live in the promised land. It took 40 years to knock the complaining out of them. It took 40 years for them to

straighten up. “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested God at Massah,” Deuteronomy says in the context of giving the Ten Commandments. “Don’t harden your hearts like you did at Meribah and Massah,” Psalm 95 says. That’s the conventional takeaway from this story, echoed through the Old Testament. Don’t complain like the people did in the wilderness. Don’t test God. Trust God.

But I kind of wonder if God doesn’t get something out of the familiar complaining, too. If the wilderness doesn’t last for 40 years partly because God gets habituated to the relationship that’s created there. I know that it’s easier to have a relationship with God when you’re in the wilderness with nothing to distract or to tempt you. I know that it’s easier to have a relationship with God when you see how fragile and fleeting life is. But maybe it’s easier for God to have a relationship with us, too. When our need is right in front of us, unable to be swept under the rug, unable to be hidden. When reliance on God isn’t something that we have opt into if we’re interested, but something that we’re desperate for, something we can’t live without.

This weekend at the retreat we focused on what improv has to do with faith and community. Patricia Ann Madson’s book *Improv Wisdom* offered 13 maxims from improv for living. Unconventional principles like “don’t prepare, just show up.” And “be average” And “Make mistakes, please.” What strikes me about improv is how much it pushes us to focus on living right now. To be present to the immediacy of our world – what’s actually going on right now. And so “don’t prepare, just show up” is encouragement to be present to how God is calling you right now or what God is doing in the world right now instead of always living in a future fantasy that you can’t control. And “be average” is encouragement to risk yourself in relationships today instead of fearing putting yourself out there for so long that you never actually learn to live in freedom. And “make mistakes, please” is a recognition that all real learning happens on the way to somewhere that we only reach by trial and error.

The improv sages will tell you that this is all relevant because life is improv. Planning is important, but you can’t plan for everything, not adequately anyway. You can’t adequately plan for parenthood. You have to show up to whatever’s before you along the way. You can’t plan for cancer. You can’t plan for death or grief that follows it. You slog your way through it. You can’t plan for marriage, or job loss, or betrayal, or the serendipity of romantic love. The best planning you can do is to practice being attentive to what’s actually happening around you and within you, learning how to ask for God’s help everyday. Planning is good. But if you’re always planning for this thing called life, you miss the main event. If you’re always focused on what God might do in your future instead of what God is trying to give you right now.

It’s easier to learn that when you are actually in the wilderness - that place where you are forced to learn to survive daily. It’s harder to see God daily without it. Privilege of any kind can be so blinding precisely because it leads its followers to think they aren’t vulnerable, that they don’t have any need, that they are above God’s care or God’s law. One of the most revealing comedy skits on Saturday Night Live skit featured an array of shocked white liberals watching the election night returns with African-American comedians Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock. “Oh my,

god,” of the white liberals says at one point, “I think America is racist.” “Oh, my, god,” Dave Chappell says tongue in cheek, “you know I remember my great grandfather told me something about that.” The night closes with Chappell and Rock reassuring the white people that it’s going to be okay, and they should get some sleep for the next day. One of the white liberals saying with deep conviction, “this is the most shameful thing America has ever done.” Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock burst into laughter.

We tend to think of privilege as a benefit in our economy, but it’s a liability in God’s economy. It blinds us to the truth that there is enough for everyone, when it’s shared. It blinds us to our own deep need and to seeing God meeting that need. And when we’re blinded to that need we tend to fear it when it rises up in us. Maybe we even become ashamed of that need because we’re so used to pretending it’s not there. Focused on what we’ve lost, we miss the God of manna and water who is so accustomed to providing us with what we need that she’ll put up with our complaining if that’s what it takes for a real relationship.

Some of you have been through the wilderness. A few of you might be there right now. I don’t wish anyone a place in the wilderness. But I know hope can often be found there. Which is why it’s better to live like wilderness people even when you’re not there. Learn to live like Jesus taught us “give us this day, our daily bread.” Learn to live as though God could quench our thirst especially when we think it can’t be quenched. Learn to live with the conviction that God can give us what we need especially when we’ve lost all hope that we’ll ever find it.

That this God of whiners and complainers is more generous than we could ever imagine, not generous with the unnecessary stuff that we pine after, but generous with love, bread and wine, and water. The things we all need. The things we’re called to share. The resources that God is giving.

Moses strikes the rock. The water flows freely. But it’s sad to me the way this text ends with the people asking, “Is the LORD among us or not?” People standing there drinking their fill, quenching their thirst, celebrating another day of life they did not earn. Life they did not create. Unable to see God standing there in front of Moses there on the rock. How could they miss God right there in front of them?