

Is God Trustworthy? Exodus 17: 1-7 (ESV)

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV

3rd Sunday of Lent (March 19,) 2017

¹ All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ And the Lord said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

The water is pouring from our rock in the worship center, added to the rocks which Jesus was tempted by Satan to turn into bread, and the rocks of the mountains to which we turn our eyes, as Psalm 121 reminded us last week.

Water from the rock. That was the result of God's work through the hand and staff of Moses – in response to their complaining ... in response to their doubting God, who had split the Red Sea in two not long before, to empower their escape, and then turned the waters back onto the Egyptian soldiers, to guarantee their escape to freedom. They are crossing through the wilderness toward the Promised Land, when the people began to

murmur, began to whine, began to say, “What have you done for me lately, God?”

And so they did – for about two generations (40 years) of wandering – allowing these naysayers to die, and to allow the next generation, which grew up on God’s trustworthiness, to enter into, and to conquer the Promised Land. Do you remember that fateful battle where they reclaimed (after 400 years absence – that would be like the native Americans coming back and re-claiming Charleston hunting grounds) when they reclaimed Jericho.

You remember the account of that, don’t you – if not from scripture (Joshua chapters 5-6), at least from the song *“Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho. Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumbling down.”* Before they marched for seven days and the walls came tumbling down, Joshua placed twelve stones in a circle for a reminder of what God had done for the children of Israel at the Red Sea, and they celebrated Passover for the first time.

Although terribly outmanned, the Israelites took this extremely unusual battle strategy, of simply marching around the city walls for seven days, because they first remembered how God had been faithful. As we discussed last Sunday – they **remembered into the future**.

They trusted in God’s direction, because they remembered that God was trustworthy.

Ach! Sometimes, although we don’t say it, we maybe think that those stories from the First Testament might have been exaggerated a bit, just to make the point. Sometimes, people nod their heads, but also wink.

So, let me tell you a more recent story. Jeff Manion, the author of the *Satisfied: Discovering Contentment in a World of Consumption* told a more up to date version of *Remembering into the Future; depending upon God's trustworthiness*. He grew up the son of a church-planting pastor. He told how time after time, over and over and over, when they were at their last penny in this non-guaranteed financial world of planting churches, a small miracle would happen and the exact amount of money that they needed at a particular time would somehow be provided in the nick of time. That was the story of his childhood and teenage years.

And then he got married. His wife Chris grew up in the home where the father was an insurance salesman. The whole success of the insurance business is to convince people that they need to be prepared for all kinds of unplanned negative events. Buy insurance.

The trustworthiness of "God will provide" was not part of Jeff's wife's upbringing (nor was regular church attendance either.) Jeff said that when they got married and he wanted to commit to the planned, disciplined giving of 10% (the tithe) it was a source of marital controversy. He wanted the reader to be very clear, his wife Chris was both kinder and more generous, by disposition than was he. But she lacked any kind of history of TRUSTING in God.

The enemy of planned, disciplined giving is not stinginess, but fear. And she had not experienced a lifetime of seeing how God can be trusted. Gradually, after she agreed to experiment with the tithe, she also became convinced of just how reliable God is, of how trustworthy God is.

Ach! But those are stories in a book. Maybe the author Jeff Manion exaggerated a little bit, just like the First Testament writers did, to make his point.

OK, so let me tell you about a Tale of Two Churches. ***These are places I've personally visited*** during my first eight years of leading work teams to Belfast, Northern Ireland. Notwithstanding "The Troubles" being about fighting between Catholics and Protestants, Northern Ireland (like most of Europe, outside Rome) finds the church to be increasingly irrelevant. They are 10-15 years ahead of what we see happening in America. Attendance is falling; budgets are tight; survival of the church is not longer a sure thing.

Two churches – one in East Belfast and the other in downtown Belfast, within eyeshot of the Belfast City Building (translation, by appearance: castle. Just ask any of the people who have gone there on work teams.)

The church in downtown Belfast had developed a new plan for revitalization – one in which they would devote much of their efforts to ministry to the poor people of downtown Belfast. The day came for a vote on the new plan, and many people came to church for the big vote. **By a majority of ONE, the opponents, who did not want "THOSE PEOPLE" coming into their building on a daily basis prevailed.** ONE VOTE prevented the new emphasis. The safety and sanctity of the building was preserved. And one year later, that very building was sold quite intact to a bank, because the church had died. And that safe and sanctified building became a very attractive bank.

The leadership at the East Belfast Mission Church had a vision of how to reach out to help the poorest of the poor in Belfast, who lived in their neighborhood. One of the first steps was the option they had to buy the

grocery store next door to the church, which had failed economically as had many businesses in East Belfast. The vision was to create a “Refurbish” store, where used furniture, bicycles, and other things could be repaired and refurbished, paying local poor and sometimes mentally challenged people to do the work. They had one day left on the option to purchase the building. The cost was FIFTY THOUSAND POUND STERLING.

The money they did not have.

They trusted that this mission to revitalize the neighborhood was from God. The pastor signed the option. Then, later that day, a man drove up to the church and came inside. He said that he had read about all the ministry that the East Belfast Mission Methodist Church was doing to help the poor. And he wanted to be a part of it.

He pulled out his checkbook and wrote a check for FIFTY THOUSAND POUND STERLING.

This summer, several of us on our work team worked in one of SEVEN of these REFURB businesses in and around Belfast, well beyond the original mission of just East Belfast.

They trusted in God. God provided.

In Worship Committee yesterday, one of our members asked the question:

❖ **How often do we encounter a problem TOO BIG FOR GOD?**

I’ve heard it put another way, as well:

❖ **How BIG IS YOUR GOD?**

There’s one more way that I’ve heard it expressed:

❖ **How much do you / your church practice FUNCTIONAL ATHEISM?**

You know – where religion is practiced that is safe within the walls of the place of worship, during the time of worship – but which is not relied upon in other places and other times.

- ❖ **The children of Massah and Meribah, and the children at the parting of the Red Sea remembered into the future, when it came to the walls of Jericho.**
- ❖ **Jeff and Chris Manion learned from childhood experiences and then, experimentally, their own marriage experience. They both came to remember into the future that God CAN be trusted.**
- ❖ **One Church in Belfast learned positive lessons from trusting in God; the other ... well, it just played it safe, right out of business.**

“Is God Trustworthy?” is the sermon title that might seem like a “no brainer,” on a church sermon board.

- ❖ **How about for you?**
- ❖ **How about what our children are learning from watching us?**
- ❖ **And when our children need a basis for REMEMBERING INTO THE FUTURE, when confronting life’s challenges, what memories of God's trustworthiness will they have from watching us?**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.