



Work's Challenges

Exodus 17:1-7

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The Third Sunday in Lent

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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 will I do with this people? They're 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?"

Exodus 17:1-7

A construction worker filed an accident report after a bad day. He wrote: When I got to the building I found that the hurricane had knocked off some bricks around the top. I rigged up a beam with a pulley at the top of the building and hoisted up a couple of barrels of bricks. When I had fixed the damaged area, there were a lot of bricks left over. I went to the bottom, and began releasing the line.

Unfortunately, the barrel of bricks was heavier than I was. Before I knew what was happening, the barrel started coming down, jerking me up. I decided to hang on, since I was too far off the ground by then to jump. Halfway up I met the barrel of bricks coming down. I received a hard blow on my right shoulder.

I continued to the top, banging my head against the beam and getting my fingers pinched in the pulley. When the barrel hit the ground, it burst, allowing the bricks to spill out. I was now heavier than the barrel. So I started down at high speed. Halfway down I met the barrel coming up and received severe injuries to my shins.

When I hit the ground, I landed on the pile of spilled bricks. At this point, I lost my presence of mind, and let go of the line. The barrel came down fast—hitting me in the head again and putting me in the hospital. I respectfully request sick leave.

We have not had that day, but we have had days—days that are not everything we wish, days when we are tired of what we do.

We work too many hours. The pension is not as good as they want you to think it is. The health insurance is confusing.

Your computer is just slow enough to be irritating. The printer works unless you really need to print something. The phone system is unreliable, “Let me transfer you—oops.”

You have a co-worker that keeps looking at her phone when she is talking to you, a co-worker that does not understand personal space, a co-worker that does not know how to tell a quick story, a co-worker that feels the need to come and tell you, “I just sent you an email,” and a co-worker that hums to the music playing through his headphones.

Everybody gets tired of those they work with, even those who work at home, even those who work alone.

Anyone with VP after their name is allowed to come up with “improvements” that make no sense. You know how to do your job. It is what they are paying you for. They ought to let you do your job. Consultants make ridiculous money, wasting your time before drawing the same conclusions that you, who understand the situation, and have already pointed out to anyone who will listen.

You spend substantial amounts of time simplifying important information to the point of draining it of any meaning.

You suspect that people without ideas are being promoted to their level of incompetence. They lead meetings that drag on and on. Even the best job gets old when paperwork piles up, deadlines loom, and problems keep interrupting. Even if we love what we do, we get frustrated.

Even if we recognize that being retired is hard. Somedays your list of things to do is longer and less interesting than the list you had when you were getting paid to do the list. You wonder why you retired.

Being a student is hard. When someone says school is the most fun you will ever have, you wonder how horrible their lives must be.

Being unemployed is hard. When someone asks what you do, what you want to do is punch them. Not really. A little.

Being a stay at home parent is hard. You love your children, but they are not rational beings. They are turning you into an irrational being.

Being a manager is hard. You have to deal with immature people, "You have to do something about the static electricity in the carpet."

Being a lawyer is hard. How many minutes are in a billable hour? Is it possible to have a conversation without charging for it?

Being a teacher is hard. You became a teacher because you wanted to help students be better people and now your job is to force them to memorize answers on standardized tests.

Being an accountant is hard. You are not asking other people to do your work, but it would be nice if they stopped saving every pizza receipt and throwing away every important document.

Being an architect is hard. You want to create something beautiful, but you have to keep explaining, "If we take out that wall, big things will fall."

Being a stock broker is hard. You were always the best math student, but you did not get a degree in fortune telling.

You get tired of explaining that you cannot guarantee exactly what will happen to the stock market.

Being a doctor is hard. You wanted to help sick people and now you spend your day filling out forms for people who want to tell you what you could learn from WebMD.

We complain about our jobs, even if we know that if we quit, they would have a stack of resumes in two days. We may have to do work that is not meaningful. We may become disillusioned with our profession. We may have to put our goals on hold while we deal with problems. We may not have the choice to move on.

Some days our lives are boring and some days are so difficult we wish they were boring. Moses has one of those days when he wishes it was boring. He wonders what he signed up for.

His new job starts so well. Moses tells Pharaoh to let the people go. He leads a mass exodus through the Red Sea. Pharaoh's army drowns. The Israelites dance. It is the greatest escape in history.

Things are going great. God sends a pillar of fire to lead them at night. God provides manna and quail to eat. God is watching out for them.

Then what seems like five minutes later, the people are talking about impeaching Moses. They just got to the desert. They are still three chapters from getting the Ten Commandments and they are already whining.

They travel for three days to Rephidim, a place that is not on any map. They are nowhere—and when they get there—right in the heart of nowhere, they realize there is no water and blame Moses. They decide that the Exodus was an evil plot on the part of their so-called deliverer: “You brought us out of Egypt for this? Egypt—a land whose name means ‘many waters.’ You brought us here so we could die of thirst. Thanks a lot, Moses.”

Moses thinks, “What a bunch of whiners. You were slaves until I showed up. And now you’re six-year-olds complaining that you want a glass of water. They call it the desert for a reason.”

Moses was dragged kicking and screaming into this job. Now the people are ready to kill him for taking the job. We are supposed to think the Israelites are being childish, but asking for water in the desert is not that unreasonable.

Moses asks, “What am I supposed to do with this people?”

You might think God would be disappointed with all the complaining, but God seems fine: “Moses, remember that staff you hit the River Nile with and the water parted. Take the staff with you and I’ll be waiting for you on a rock. Hit the rock and you’ll get more water than you could ever drink.”

It sounds like magic. Some read the story and think Moses hit a rock and water started pouring out. Or maybe Moses found a rock covering a spring and pushed the rock out of the way. Or maybe water gushing from a rock is a poetic way of saying that even in the wilderness God is with them.

Moses names the place Massah and Meribah which means complain and argue, not because they complain about being thirsty, but because they argue that their difficulties suggest that God is not with them. God does not mind. The complaining works. They complain about water. They get water.

The Israelites write songs about this moment in the wilderness when the people complain. There are five Psalms that put this peculiar story to music (78, 81, 95, 105, and 106). You would think they would want to forget this embarrassing moment, but Israel sings about their grumbling and God’s patience. They sing because the water they were thirsty for was right there, just under the surface, all along. Right at the height of their frustration, water flows from a rock as a sign that God is with them.

The question the aggravated Israelites asked, “Is God with us or not?” is a question we ask even if we do not ask it that

way. Some days are filled with frustrations, and on those hard days God cares for us.

Sometimes God calls us away from work that is no longer life-giving, but more often God calls us in the midst of the work we do. We usually do better if we see God not as a solution to problems, but as hope in the midst of frustrations. When we cannot change a situation, we can choose how we live within it with kindness and hopefulness.

God calls us to joy, but it is often a joy that includes responsibility, sacrifice, and endurance. God teaches us to be more compassionate toward others. God works through our frustration to create something new. God shapes us through the struggles we face.

It is a good gift that we, peculiar, frustrated, wonderful people that we are, long for more—more meaning, more purpose. The dissatisfaction that gnaws at us, the craving for more than just getting by is God calling us to God.

It may be our best answer to the question, “Is God among us or not?” It may be the ultimate proof—if there is such a thing within our own souls—that God is with us—helping us see our lives in a new light, pushing us to love those around us. There are no days on which God is not present calling us to more, inviting us to see that our lives are amazing.

Being retired is holy when you have had a full day, and the people you love are better for what you have done for them.

Being a student is holy in those moments when what you are learning and who you need to be come together, and your life gets bigger.

Being unemployed is holy, when the bitterness you feel gives way to the hope that is beyond understanding, and you know it is going to be okay.

Being a stay at home parent is holy when you outlast your child, hold your sleeping daughter, and know that in that moment there is nowhere you would rather be.

Being a manager is holy when you talk someone down off the ledge and the light shines through the clouds.

Being a lawyer is holy when you help the right people win—and know they would not have won if you were not there.

Being a teacher is holy when a student who seemed asleep at his desk wakes up and wants to know what you know.

Being an accountant is holy when you find a better way, when you encourage someone who was about to give up.

Being an architect is holy when you make the place where people live more welcoming in ways they do not even recognize.

Being a broker is holy when you help a tired person who wanted to retire five years ago get there better late than never.

Being a doctor is holy when the patient gets better, and you do not want to take too much credit, but you were right and WebMD was wrong.

Your life is holy when God brings peace, comfort, and the ability to see that what you do each day is holy.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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