

# Die Schlag Ruthe

## *Exodus 17:1-7*

CWZepp, BWCOB, September 27, 2020

When I was young, I hated water. At least I thought I did. As kids, we usually were given the option of drinking water or milk with our meals, and I always chose milk, not so much because we came from a dairy family or because I liked milk so much, but rather because I didn't like water.

It took me a while to figure out that it wasn't actually that I didn't care for – rather it was just *our* water. I don't remember when it happened exactly, but at some point I realized that I actually liked the water at my Grandma and Granddaddy Dick's house. They were on a city water line – which my parents disparaged as the “polluted Potomac,” but which I eventually learned I actually found refreshing.

And then there was the forbidden water. That came from the field spigots out back from our house, which drew directly from our well, bypassing the water-softener which treated the tap water inside, and from which we kids were not supposed to drink. But sometimes when we were working outside in the heat, it was easier to drink straight from the hose or even stick our faces beneath the spigot and let the water gush all over our face as we quenched our thirst and wetted our parched throats. I don't know who started me doing it – it was either my Dad or my Pap. Either way, it came with the expressed directive to not let my mother know. (Turns out they didn't like the water in our house much either.)

That water was always wonderful. Partly because it wasn't treated with the water softener. Partly because it was straight from the ground and wasn't heavily treated with whatever Hagerstown's city water from the Potomac River required. But I think it was mostly because when I drank it, I was *always* very thirsty. There is nothing as refreshing as cold water when you are hot and thirsty.

I was thinking about that water from our backyard spigots when I was reading today's scripture, and the story of Moses striking the rock at Horeb in the wilderness at Rephidim. I have never known life-threatening thirst, and yet I could still almost feel the rejuvenating effects that water must have brought to the thirsty Israelites. I could almost taste clean, cold refreshment that came from that rock. And in my mind, it tasted like the water that came from my backyard spigots.

Since my mother's stroke in July, I have been spending a lot more time than usual back on my family's farm outside of Hagerstown, MD, and my mind has often been wondering through a lifetime of memories from that place. It's a pretty normal thing for us when we are going through troubled times. If you have been a part of our family of faith at BWCOB, you know I have been having a fairly rough go of it lately. And so my mind has been almost constantly filled with memories – from my days growing up on the farm in Maryland, of my life as a student at South Hagerstown high and Bridgewater College, of the people and experiences I had living in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, from the nearly fourteen years of life and ministry I've had to date here in Bridgewater, of friends and family and loved ones who have passed on or fallen victim to the ravages of age or disease. So many memories. Mostly good. Time has a way of filtering through the good times and the bad, and merging them into a

collective one or the other. And right now, I confess that I spend a lot of time grieving what was. Nostalgia for days gone by is not how I imagined I would be spending my early 40s. But it is where I find myself right now.

And though my individual circumstances are unique, I don't believe that I am alone in this wilderness. The isolation and disruption in normal routines and activities caused by the current pandemic has affected us all. The social unrest and divisive political climate in our country have left many of us longing for better and more peaceful times, at least as we remember them. Working from home, educating our children through zoom, worshipping on YouTube, and surrounded by people wearing masks anytime we are in public makes those days (not that long ago) when we could hug and shake hands, sing and share food, and come together with other living and breathing human beings to work and learn and worship without fear or anxiety seem like Paradise Lost. Remember those days when we could celebrate births and marriages and graduations together, grieve our dead and say our goodbyes together, invite new friends or neighbors over for dinner, or cheer on our local teams together? Yeah me too. We all do.

I suspect that the sentiments among the Israelites we meet in today's scripture were not all that different from ours right now. This passage, like last week's text, is part of a series of "complaint narratives" that feature prominently in the chronicles of the Exodus. These were a people whose lives had been disrupted (albeit by their own chosen action), whose "normal" had been obliterated, whose support systems had been compromised, whose spirits were running low, who were worn out from their wilderness journey, and who were just sick and tired of the journey they had been traveling. And just now, as they made their camp at Rephidim, they were thirsty. As often happens when we are running on empty, their thirst pushed them over the edge, and all those unpleasant, messy thoughts and feelings came spilling out, and the people lashed out at Moses.

*Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" they ask?*

But just as when we are tired or hangry, the complaint of the Israelites was about more than the lack of water. Yes, they were thirsty. But their thirst was only a surface catalyst that tipped a much deeper issue. They were despairing. They were tired of the constant change, the constant dangers, the constant lack, the constant unknowns of the wilderness. They looked back longingly at their former life as they longed for stability lost – for known resources even if they were scant and predictable routines even if they were oppressive. And they looked forward to...what? They didn't really know. Freedom? Could be a dream. The Promised Land? Maybe it was a myth. Was God with them or not? How could they know? The evidence of the moment indicated otherwise.

At its root, the complaint of the thirsty Israelites is that they feel abandoned by God – left alone to wander in some God forsaken wilderness. Our favorite Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says this about the people of Israel's complaint in this passage:

*The focus is upon their deep need and upon the way in which the deepest question of faith is connected to the deepest material reality of life....What happens in this transaction is that the water question (material, concrete support for life) is turned into the God Question concerning the one who "leads us besides still waters..." As a result, they dared to ask the question, "Is the Lord among us or not?" The Bible does not everywhere assume that God is present, but knows about the dry places where God's absence is overwhelming. They*

*ask the God Question about the water problem, because they knew they were up against it in their need.... This is a demanding, quarrelsome engagement, but the Israelites in their anxiety were exceedingly practical. They did not want a God who would not deliver on the real stuff needed to make life possible.... And when God gives water for life, Israel's deepest question is answered: Yes: the Lord is among us!... The story is about God's inexplicable capacity to do well-being in a world that has been shut down. Yes even in wilderness...<sup>1</sup>*

Brueggemann's words prompted a couple of thoughts in me. First off, that last line – “God's inexplicable capacity to do well-being in a world that has been shut down” – struck me as a Gospel word tailor-made for our present moment, even though it was delivered in a sermon in Virginia over eighteen years ago. But secondly, there was something about that line about “the water question...turned into the God Question concerning the one who “leads us besides still waters...” that echoed in my soul. I left my study pondering its resonance, until it finally dawned on me –

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul...  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil, for you are with me;  
Your rod and your staff – they comfort me.<sup>2</sup>*

That Psalm follows Psalm 22, which famously begins with the words that a thirsty and despairing Jesus uttered from the cross – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“Is the Lord among us or not?” the thirsty and despairing Israelites asked in the wilderness. And then the answer – “yes, even in wilderness.” Yes, even when you walk through the darkest valley. Your rod and your staff – they comfort me. And my cup overflows...

I never really understood the comfort of the rod and staff line in that Psalm before. I always thought it was some vague reference to fending off wild animals or something. But when considered alongside the story of the Exodus – the master narrative of the people of Israel – it took on new meaning. When Moses relayed the complaints of the people to God, he was told to take his ever present staff – the same staff that was used to turn the water of the Nile bitter, the same staff that he lifted up to part the waters of the Red Sea – and to strike for water at the rock at Horeb.

Your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

This line of thinking led me to recall another memory – again from my childhood backyard. It was an image of my Pap, walking slowly with a forked stick in hand through the field behind where my parents were building their new house. I had been told that Pap was a water-finder, and that he had used his skills to locate the wells for a number of our extended family's homes. But I don't recall ever seeing him do it. At least until that image came to mind. I wasn't even sure it was a real memory at first. I was only about 5 years old when my parents built their house on my mother's home farm where I grew up. So when I was visiting Mom this week, I asked her about the memory, and she assured me that it is probably real – Pap did indeed

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Big Yes.” *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*. pp. 198-199.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 23:1-3a, 4, NRSV

locate the well they drilled and that still provides water for my family – both the nasty stuff that goes through the softener and that crisp, refreshing water that flows from our backyard spigots. And she says that we were all there, and that he used the forked stick that was his tool of choice for water finding.

That tool is known alternately as a dowsing rod, a divining rod, a witching stick, or a striking rod. The Middle Low German name for such a Y-shaped, forked stick was *schlag-ruthe* – or “striking rod.”<sup>3</sup> In the hands of someone who knows who to use it – someone like my Pap – it can lead to a water source that can refresh and sustain generations.

Your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

Perhaps that comforting rod and staff aren’t about wild animals after all. Perhaps they recall die schlag ruthe of the people of Israel – the rod with which Moses struck water from the rock, the staff which symbolized God’s mastery over the waters in the story of their deliverance. Perhaps they are assurances of the provision of God – reminders that the deepest questions of faith are indeed connected to the deepest material realities of life.

We are a thirsty people, with a penchant for thirsting after things that do not ultimately satisfy. As we consider our own wilderness journeys this day, may we remember that our truest thirst is always for God – for the living water that restores not just our bodies, but also our souls.

With die schlag ruthe in our hearts, may we seek that beautiful stream...

## **BENEDICTION**

May the God of our ancestors  
continue to move in our midst.

May all who thirst come to the water  
and seek that beautiful stream

And may all of us who have gathered now at the well  
Draw deeply, and take with us enough  
to offer a cup to another.

Here’s to the Living Water...

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<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dowsing>