

October 1, 2023

*“What Price, War?”*

*Based on \*Exodus 17:1-17. A Place of Respite in the Wilderness*

*\*incarnational translation below*

It is supposed to be a place of rest. This well-known oasis in the wilderness where Moses leads the people, a couple of months beyond their liberation from Egypt. It is supposed to be a spring of living water gushing from the rocks to whet the thirst of all who come, human and more-than-human alike.

Instead it is a trickle. Barely enough for a splash. Not nearly enough for the whole congregation, dusty and dirty, cranky and whiny, ready to *get on with it*, by the way, on the other side of their heroic escape from the ones who held them hostage.

And we can relate. We have just lived through COVID after all, with its twists and turns and fits and starts and ongoing lingering effects. Like the ancient Israelites, we have been miffed when the journey that by all rights could have - and should have - taken just a few weeks now turns into a decades long slog-fest impacting generations to come.

As our Coordinator for Children and Youth Ministry, Christa Joyce, and I reflected just last week, we have been operating in crisis mode for so long, it is a shock to the system to actually find space to breathe and reflect, let alone plan for the near to mid-term future.

We need a rest. We *deserve* a rest! Instead we get a government shutdown - averted last-minute, but still. We need a rest but instead we get a multi-million dollar financial crunch at Shepherd University, once in a hundred year flooding in New York City and a war with no end in sight in Ukraine.

*Was all of this a big cosmic joke? we might wonder. Rescue us from COVID, only to knock us out with inflation and incompetence?*

To which the Spirit of God replies: *I got you. Just look a little deeper. You really do have everything you need.*

And it is true.

When we gather in community, even wandering in the wilderness, we find we have enough, in unexpected ways. When the government shuts down, Shepherdstown Shares steps in. When flooding hits home, neighbor helps neighbor. When a nation's sovereignty is invaded, the entire world realigns.

When we gather in community, no matter what kind of wilderness, we find we have enough. And we are not alone.

This is what World Communion Sunday is about. Yes, there is good reason to complain. Yes, our leaders seem so often inept, and yes we are right to hold them to account. But they are in the wilderness, too, right along with us, and the places they have been taught to lead us all their lives do not look the same as they once did. At some point our leaders, too, have to throw up their hands in despair and ask for help, both human and divine.

The same is true for this leader standing in front of you, the Ruling Elders and Deacons of SPC, our staff, and everyone else. Yes, we made it through COVID. Deep breath. Yes, we made it through all kinds of other major transitions. Deep breath. But we are, in many ways, still wandering in the wilderness of what is new, still in need of help, both human and divine, to guide the way.

In the meantime, a place of rest remains right here, whenever we need and oasis of grace: a stream of living water, a table that sustains, a sacred story that brings us hope, a trust that we are led on the journey together by a love that will not ever let us go, and a promise of peace that passes all understanding.

*\*Exodus 17:1-7*

The whole congregation  
slogged through the wilderness,  
intending to be led by the Spirit of God.

They finally arrived at a well-known campsite,  
but the stream had dried up to a trickle.

The people threw a fit, chanting,  
“We Want Water! We Want Water!”

Moses retorted,  
“The complaint department is closed!  
We followed God into the wilderness,  
now we trust God in the wilderness!”

But the people were genuinely thirsty.  
They rose up against Moses again, demanding,  
“Was this all one big cosmic joke?  
Rescue us from Egypt,  
only to kill us and our children  
and livestock with thirst?”

Moses threw up his hands in desperation,  
“What am I supposed to do, God!?”  
he shouted. “They are almost ready to stone me!”

And then, divine inspiration!  
“Go on ahead of the people,”  
the wisdom of God revealed,  
“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,”  
the Spirit of God made clear.  
“Strike the rock, and water will come out of it,  
so that the people may drink.”

Moses did what he had discerned,  
surrounded by his leadership team.

Moses then named that land:  
Place of Testing and Strife  
because that is where  
the faith and the commitment of the people  
was tested.

*\*“Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places” (Cosgrove and Edgerton, **In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching**, 62).*