

First Presbyterian Church
Numbers 20:1-13, “Waters of Hope”
By Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/29/2020 Advent 1

When I was young, I had a dog that wouldn't listen.

It was a beagle, which we selected because of its medium size,
its warm temperament, and astonishing level of cuteness.

I loved our beagle Maggie, but my father had a different perspective.

You see, Maggie wouldn't listen.

No command offered by a mere human could penetrate
her fervent desire to roll about in the manure of
our neighbor's cow pastures.

So if she ever escaped our property, there was no stopping her.

She would inevitably come back thrilled at the new perfume she discovered,
and we would have to throw her wriggling body of stank
in the utility sink and shampoo the green goo away.

One day we were out for a family walk when Maggie yanked
and her leash got loose of my hand. My dad called out
in his booming voice for her to stop! Sit! Maggie!

When these clear instructions were ignored, he did something surprising:

He stopped, took off his shoe, and hurled it directly on her path.
My dad was bow hunter so he knew how to aim at target,
but this time his shoe landed harmlessly on the road
and Maggie scampered on her way
while he muttered things

I probably wasn't supposed to hear.

He was tired of words going unheard.

He was tired of waiting for this dog to get with the program.

He wanted to do something dramatic to prove his point.

In the end, the dog did what it wanted, he had to get his sock wet
walking over to pick up his shoe, and I was left looking at my father
wondering why. Why did he have to get so angry?

But sometimes we all can get frustrated.

Sometimes it seems that our words are pointless.

Can you imagine trying to convince people they need to wear a mask
during a pandemic even as numbers reach higher every week?

Sometimes we get tired of waiting for life to get back to normal.

Sometimes we grow weary of waiting for Christ to arrive in our world,
which is what the Advent season is all about.

Sometimes we just want to throw our shoe or give something
a good whack and hope that somehow the rest of the world
will finally get with the program.

But that's not the way of faith, my friends.

That's not the way we are get through this time of waiting and wandering.

Israel was waiting and wandering.

For nearly 40 years they had been in the desert.

Wandering through the desert of Zin,
waiting for the time they could enter into the promised land.

Not only were they waiting and wandering – they were thirsty!

And thirst can make a person forgetful.

It had been many years past the great deeds done by God
through Moses & Aaron.

It had been a long time since they had seen Moses
raise up his staff as God parted the waters of the Red Sea.

So they were grumbling. Everybody grumbles from time to time,
nothing so surprising or terrible about that.

But the grumbling reported in Numbers 20 suggests that
all this waiting and wandering was pointless—that they would be better off
if they had never left their captors.

The implication of this grumbling is that God hasn't been faithful, isn't reliable,
and their salvation is worth less than nothing—better to go back
to Egypt where at least you can grow figs!

Moses & Aaron have heard this complaint. Can you imagine how they feel?

In v. 6 they go into the tent of meeting, their place of worship,
and they get down on their faces—
probably muttering things we aren't supposed to hear.
What will it take to get these people through this desert.
Will God ever bring them out?

But God is gracious, God is so good and kind,
God comes to us even when things look so bad.
The people are thirsty, and God loves these people—
as has been demonstrated powerfully so many times already.

God says to Moses and Aaron, “Take your staff, go up to this huge rock wall,
and speak to it. Command it to produce water.”

These are very specific instructions.

In v. 9 things start off well enough. The staff is taken,
and the people are gathered, just as God instructed.

But then in v. 10 the whole thing starts to veer off course.
We have to imagine something of the psychology here
to understand what happens.

I imagine that Moses and Aaron started out intending to do just what God had said,
and to give Yahweh, the Lord, full credit for the incredible miracle
that they were about to witness.

But then they see the faces of these grumblers.
Then they remember the things they've been overhearing,
and the foul looks being thrown from the back of the crowd.
And at that point Moses has just had enough with words.
He's tired and thirsty and worn out just like everybody else.

So instead of pointing people the goodness of God in their time of need,
he shouts out at the crowd, “Listen, you rebels,
must we bring you water out of this rock?”

We? Where dis Moses and Aaron get off thinking
that they were the ones producing water in the desert?
When did this ever become their operation?
Let us never think that when we share in the work of God
that it is actually *our* work, that we change people's hearts,
that we fill people with the Spirit of God,
that we provide water in the desert.
Never mix up God graciously inviting us to participate
in his power and goodness with us being the ones
who are the source of power and goodness.

Moses has had it with pretty words, he's not going to pray a flowery blessing
over a piece of rock. He's not going to command the water to flow,
his frustration has reached the breaking point.

He grabs his staff, raises it high in the air so everyone can see that
it is *he* who brings it down with such force, and he strikes that rock.
Nothing happens.

The people look at him and start to laugh.
Moses is left standing there like my Dad with one shoe on
in the middle of the road.

So he brings it down again and strikes the rock with the mighty staff.

What happened next was a thing of wonder and terror.

Wonder – the promised water flowed!
It came pouring out from the side of the rock,
and all the people drank their fill and watered their livestock.
Life was set right again.

What a wonder! But the next emotion was terror: What had Moses done?
He had called down judgment on the people
and said that he and Aaron would do this mighty deed
in the face of the people's rebellion.

They made themselves the stars of the show...
and then God showed up and fulfilled the promise anyway.

The Lord knew that this way of leading would never do in the promised land.
There could be no rivals for the power, authority,
and lovingkindness of God.

And so in v. 12 the Lord announced to Moses and Aaron,
“Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy
in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community
into the land I give them.”

We all get tired. We all get impatient. We wonder if God will do what is promised.
This is as trying a time as many of us have ever seen.

But my friends, we can live with hope because God is faithful
even when the desert seems endless. Though Moses and Aaron faltered,
Israel’s faith ultimately endured!

The Hebrew people made it through their grumbling
and made it through the desert. They entered the land.
They lived into their in hope that God would send an Anointed One:
A Messiah who would bring water to the thirsty,
but not by banging sticks in frustration.

This Messiah would heal the hurt and befriend the lonely,
and show the way to be human through patience and love.

That is the one who came in Bethlehem so long ago.
And that is why we have lit the candle of hope.

Friends, be still, listen, look, and you will discover that God is faithful
to the promises of Scripture.
Drink deeply, for the waters of God’s hope are flowing even today.