

So here we are back in the wilderness, this time not with Jesus and the devil, but with Moses and his Hebrew flock. There is testing happening here too, but of a very different sort than the grandiose temptations Satan threw Jesus' way. These people are **thirsty**, and their patience is wearing thin. The tension is so thick you could cut it with a knife. And it's no wonder, for not only do they have nothing to drink in the middle of a hot desert, but this is not the first dire situation they've faced under Moses' leadership.

First, in Exodus 14, there was the initial leg of their flight out of Egypt, when they reached the shores of the Reed Sea and, seeing the Egyptians in hot pursuit, said to Moses, "Weren't the cemeteries large enough in Egypt so that you had to take us out here in the wilderness to die? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?"

Back in Egypt didn't we tell you this would happen? Didn't we tell you, 'Leave us alone here in Egypt—we're better off as slaves in Egypt than as corpses in the wilderness.'" ...Then, just three days later, in Exodus 15, they could find only bitter water to drink and again complained against him, "So what are we supposed to drink?" ...A few weeks later, in Exodus 16, the people were hungry and once more complained to Moses, "Why didn't GOD let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat? You've brought us out into this wilderness to starve us to death, the whole company of Israel!"

All told, **four times** in the space of **less than three months**, the Israelites bitterly **complained** and **quarreled** with Moses. It's no wonder Moses named this fourth location "The Testing

Place” and “Quarreling.” Clearly the people were getting on his last nerve. And I daresay the feeling was mutual.

And yet, despite all of those challenges, they were still here! Four major and immediate threats to their lives, and *someone* had obviously lived to tell about it! As the epic story goes, first God parted the Reed Sea to let the Israelites through, closing the waters upon their Egyptian oppressors and drowning them. Then, at God’s command, Moses threw a stick of wood into the bitter water, and it turned sweet and drinkable. Then God dropped manna from heaven for the people to eat. And finally, as per God’s instructions, Moses struck a rock with a staff, and water poured out of it for the people to drink. Four major obstacles to survival averted by four highly creative, miraculous solutions delivered in short order, compliments of God.

With those kinds of stats before them--four for four--many scholars and lay people alike have questioned the faith of Moses’ flock, oftentimes characterizing them as a whiny, thankless bunch. Some have assessed their complaints as the exaggerated language of hyperbole. Just how many over-the-top miracles in quick succession did they need before they simply relaxed and believed that God had and would continue to take care of them? I would guess Moses was thinking something along those lines, probably with a few expletives thrown in.

And yet imagine what a shock to the peoples’ systems it must have been to one day be living the oppressed yet highly structured, predictable lives of slaves...and the next be wandering around in a seemingly endless wilderness with a brand-new leader, no provisions, an open-ended schedule, and an iffy game plan. Do you think the ancient Israelites liked change, the unknown, or ambiguity any better than we do today? This story tells us pretty clearly, not! To a certain extent,

they and we are creatures of habit. Besides, we're talking about some pretty basic necessities here, the very lowest rung of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. **Nobody** lives long without water. And, while I've never come anywhere near starvation, I know I can get faint, nauseous, and crabby when my blood sugar goes too low, and extremely anxious when there is no food in sight to raise it back up. I understand that dehydration has a similar effect. So how else would we expect the Israelites to have reacted to their plight?

Interestingly enough, although Moses is clearly annoyed with them, we don't see God condemning the people for their complaints. God simply listens to Moses' reports and addresses the peoples' needs directly: saving them from their enemies, feeding them, and providing drinkable water for them. These were not unreasonable requests, God's acts acknowledge. The people had a will to live, and they spoke up until they were heard.

Over the years these and other historical narratives have become liturgical and scriptural touchstones of the Jewish faith. And of Christianity too, particularly for African Americans, who have found in the Israelites' saga parallels to their own experiences as former slaves struggling toward the Promised Land of safety, freedom, self-determination, and dignity. Now I know that, as **we** hear these stories through our 21st century ears, they can be challenging to believe with our heads, the stuff of hyperbole and myth. But suffice it to say that something incredible *did* happen to the Israelites as they escaped bondage in Egypt, even as we in our own history have remarkable historical documentation of Underground Railroad and other bold, highly unlikely escapes. We too can look to our less distant pasts for affirmation that God is indeed present, active, and creative in the wide arc of history, that God co-creates with faithful individuals, and

that, through these partnerships, that which is just and life-giving ultimately triumphs. If we had to sum up the bible, with a few basic themes, I believe these would come pretty close.

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Today we find ourselves in a very different sort of a quandary. We are not newly free slaves.

America's role in the socio-political landscape is probably closer to Egypt's. And yet we stand at a crossroads where we can all too easily imagine our way of life slipping away, right before our eyes. After years of excess, the pendulum of middle class American promise and privilege seems to be swinging back in the other direction. We have watched helplessly as the value of our homes and our life savings has plummeted. Jobs have disappeared into thin air, leaving **14 million** people unemployed, many not just for months, but for **years**, with no real end in sight. Chronic military conflicts and tax cuts have yielded a monstrous budget deficit, risking shut-down of our government and jeopardizing the most basic of services: education, police, healthcare, the free speech of public media and labor unions. Which in turn threatens the shape of our children's and grandchildren's futures. Unlike generations past, they probably won't be more affluent than their parents. It will likely be far more difficult to secure an education...and then a desirable job.

As if this alone weren't more than enough, we are *not* quite all in this together. In 2009, the richest 5% of our population claimed almost 64% of the nation's wealth. The bottom 80% laid claim to just under 13%. Yet, two years later, the rich continue to benefit from what were supposed to have been *temporary* tax cuts. Corporations, too, are flush with cash, but continue to garner outlandish incentives. On Thursday the New York Times reported that General Electric--the nation's largest corporation--reaped \$14.2 billion in 2010 profits worldwide, \$5.1 billion of that from U.S. operations, ...and that, in return, they had received not a hefty tax bill, but a

benefit of \$3.2 billion. Meanwhile, politicians continue to resist phasing out tax cuts for the rich and instead push for cuts to the programs that most clearly impact the other 80% of us.

Leaving those already on the margins at greater and greater risk of losing the last precious threads of already precarious safety nets...And modest churches like our own facing significant budget gaps that make it more and more challenging to stay afloat and help those neighbors in need.

Now I know I'm probably not telling you much, if anything, new here. And these days probably few of us need a lot of help hunkering down in a pit of despair. These are not just distant news stories. These are close to home: Us, our families, neighbors, and friends. But I do want to assure you that this is neither the final word nor the ultimate reality. That God is here, in our midst, feeling our pain. But also two steps ahead of us, seeking opportunities to break into human history and cultivate peace, justice, and compassion. Even when nothing could feel further from the truth, we must look to our religious and cultural roots and remember what God has done, so *creatively* and so *unexpectedly*, and, no doubt, will continue to do.

We might also look back specifically to these Israelites enroute from Egypt to the Promised Land--these people who were every bit as anxious and doubtful as we can find ourselves. They nevertheless found the candor and the courage to dialogue with their leader, to raise their voices in anger and lament until he heard them loud and clear. And did the right thing--took up their concerns with God, then rolled up his sleeves and worked alongside God to resolve the crises.

Now we do not live in a theocracy as these Israelites did. We *try* to observe a pretty clearly demarcated separation of church and state. But that doesn't mean that we as faithful people can't

pray boldly for the state of our country. And it doesn't mean that we can't speak boldly to the leaders who claim to represent us all. Or that we can't act boldly, modeling a different way of being, knowing that we, as we do, we are sending ripples out well beyond ourselves--ripples that God may just find an imaginative way to grab onto and magnify into decisive action for good. Yes, we might well annoy a Moses or two in the process. But isn't that a small price to pay with so much at stake? And what is it they say about the squeaky wheel...?