

A Lectionary 26 10.1.23

Exodus 17:1-17

Focus Statement: God is with us in our worst.

Cat has seasonal allergies. I've suspected this for years, because he and I always start sneezing at about the same time in the spring and fall. They're not terrible for either of us, more annoying than anything, and most years we both get off with nothing more than sneezing and the occasional watery eyes. This year, poor fluffer got himself a bit of an ear infection. Travis and I noticed him rubbing his ears and shaking his head a lot, and a trip to the vet confirmed a mild sinus infection. He got a shot of Benadryl to stop the itching, and we were sent home with two bottles of liquid, a saline ear wash for the morning and antifungal ear drops for the evening. A fun fact Travis and I learned in this period of cat ear care: cats, not surprisingly, don't like it when you put stuff in their ears. The saline ear wash is the worst because it's the most liquid. Thanks to incessant head shaking, I've spent every morning for the last week with more ear wash on me and on the bed than in the cat's ears.

The drops are easier to manage, but equally despised by the cat. He's come to recognize the bottle, so he tries to take off as soon as I pick it up. And when we're done, he looks at us with such sheer disgust like, why in the world have you done this to me? He will not be petted; he just glares and meows annoyedly before turning his back on both of us and grumping down the stairs with pure kitty disdain. We try to tell him, kitty, we aren't doing this for funsies. No one enjoys putting drops in the cat's ears. We do it because you were sad and miserable when you had an ear infection and now you feel better. But he's a cat, so he doesn't understand or care. He is one hundred percent convinced that we stick stuff in his ears every night because we are sick, sadistic weirdos who enjoy torturing cats. Luckily,

his attention span is also like three minutes long, so this ire doesn't last long. But while he remembers the indecency, we hear about it.

I thought about that because Cat's response kind of reminds me of the Israelites to Moses of late. For the third week in a row, our passage this morning has the Israelites coming to Moses with a totally legitimate concern in the most melodramatic way possible. And maybe you've started to see a pattern in these complaints. When the Egyptian army was approaching them, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" When they didn't have food, "If only we had died by the hands of the Lord in the land of Egypt... for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." And now when they need water, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" In each of these instances, approaching army, lack of food, lack of water, the Israelites' complaint isn't about their need as much as it is about their question of Moses' leadership. Why have you, Moses, brought us here to die?

And of course, Moses didn't bring them into the wilderness. Not just he didn't bring them into the wilderness to die, he didn't bring them into the wilderness at all. Remember back in chapter three, Moses didn't want to bring them anywhere. He did his level best to get out of the position of leader and let someone else do the bringing. All of this was God's doing.

God brought them into the wilderness, a point Moses tried to make clear when they first demanded of him, "Give us water to drink," replying, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do

you test the Lord?” Don’t get mad at me, Moses was saying. I’m not the reason we’re all stuck in the wilderness thirsty. I was plenty happy in Midian with my father-in-law’s flocks while you all were slaves in Egypt. Being stuck in the desert with you grumpy and quarrelsome lot isn’t my idea of a good time either. Take it up with God if you have complaints on the accommodations. But God wasn’t there in front of them, in the flesh, that they could see and touch and complain to, like Moses was, so they persisted.

And Moses, in frustration more than anything, I think, turned to God. “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” God can tell the problem is less the people’s need, though the need for water is certainly a real one, is less the people’s need and more their fear. Is Moses trustworthy, is he leading us in the right way, can we put our faith in Moses, and through following Moses, can we put our faith in God. And Moses, poor Moses, he’s tired of having his leadership questioned. He didn’t really want to be the leader in the first place, and his whole attempt has been marked by “why are you trying to kill us.” On his good days, I’m sure he understood that the people were scared, and the journey was hard, and it wasn’t personal. But certainly, I’m sure there were days where he was just like, I’m doing the best I can guys with an impossible and constantly changing situation, please just give me a break. To a much lesser extent than the Israelites, I think of all the times I snapped at one of you during the pandemic when you asked a very legitimate question about say, what my back up plan was for rain while we were worshipping outside. None of you accused me to trying to kill you, in fact you all made it very clear that we were all on the same page of trying not to kill each other, and still it was hard and exhausting to figure out what to do next in the constantly changing landscape of restrictions. And lest you think I’m

casting myself in the role of Moses here, let me assure you, I've been on the Israelite side as well, during that same pandemic. I remember how absolutely frustrated I got with the leadership, any leadership, with the changing cavalcade of thoughts, opinions, and begged, just tell me what to do. Why have you led me, led us, into the wilderness to change the plan of action every other twenty minutes! And logically, I knew they were doing the best they could with the information they had, which wasn't more information than I had. But emotionally, as one trying to follow said constantly changing information, I felt a bit like Cat. Is it fun for you to just jerk with me and make me change courses every time I get a plan in place?!

Point being, I, like you, have experience as an exhausted leader and a frustrated follower. I've been doing my best to lead a group reluctant to trust, and I've been the untrusting member of a group, looking around and saying, I don't think you know where we're going. And I love God's response to Moses here, because it's different than how God solved the no food problem. With the no food problem, God rained down bread in the form of dew for the people to eat. Moses had to tell the people, "this is bread," other than that, the provision was all God's doing. But here, God said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders... take in your hand the staff... and go. I will be standing there in front of you." God made Moses, through the staff that God had given Moses as a sign of God's authority, the bringer of the water. God brought the water, but it was through Moses's hands that God made the miracle occur.

And you'd think this would generate worship from Moses and the people. They have water, Moses's authority has been restored, everything is right, and the journey can continue. But, the text tells us, that is not how the story ended. The story ended with Moses naming the place Massah and Meribah, "because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" Here's where we need some translation. Massah means Test and Meribah means quarrel, pulling from the roots of the words Moses used in verse two when he said, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" One of the commentaries I read described Massah and Meribah as translating to Testingville and Complainingburg. Clearly Moses wasn't yet over his annoyance with the Israelites lack of trust in his leadership, reluctant though it may have been.

And guess what, dear people of God, that Moses wasn't over it by the end of the story is, from my read, the good news of the story. Because everyone leaves the story with their needs met and still annoyed at each other, and its only chapter seventeen. The story goes on. Dear people of God, the good news of this story is sometimes we're grumpy at each other, and God still shows up. Sometimes we are reluctant leaders and frustrated followers, and God still shows up. Sometimes we have legit needs and big feelings, and God still shows up. Ours is a God who doesn't need our best days to be present in and with and through and among us. God just shows up for us, with us, in us, leading us forward to the kingdom which God has promised. Dear people of God, who you are, as you are, on the good days and the grumpy days, is where God is. Thanks be to God. Amen.