

“Blessed Reassurance”
Exodus 17:1-7
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There’s nothing like a little time in the wilderness to make you UNSURE of yourself.

Thirst will do it too.

When we’re feeling vulnerable - - we also usually feel - - less SURE of things.

The Hebrew people described in the Old Testament are a classic example of this.

They are often characterized as doubters.

People criticize their grumbling and complaining.

“They are freed from slavery and then they don’t like the manna,” we say.

So you could describe the Hebrew people of ancient Israel as - - people who need reassurance. / But WHY do you think that is?

Why do you think the Hebrew people need so much reassurance?

Are they just ungrateful grumpy complainers?

Or is there another explanation...?

I think there IS another explanation and here it is:

Over and over they are offered assurance by Moses and by God that God is with them.

Assurance - - is given - - that is followed by challenges and dangers and crisis.

The original assurance was intended to give them courage.

And the courage was intended to help them meet the challenges.

But when the challenges just KEEP coming - - they need RE-assurance.

So I don’t think they need reassurance because they are grumpy.

I think they need reassurance because they keep finding themselves in a really tough spot.

They experience crisis after crisis...

After a while a person can only take so much.

And so even if you were once assured of God's care for you...

You might need to hear it again.

I think that is what is happening in chapter 17 of Exodus when they are THIRSTY and Moses manages to get WATER to flow - - from a rock - - in the desert wilderness.

It is NOT the first time they have needed reassurance.

Over and over they go from faith to doubt.

Moses told them way back in chapter 4 that God was with them - - and showed them signs of this - - and assured them. / And at that point it says they believed and worshipped.

But then in chapter 6 they doubt again because of what Exodus says is:

“Their crushed spirit and cruel bondage”

If I had a crushed spirit and experienced cruel bondage, I might need reassurance too.

So they are reassured.

But then the plagues come...

Plague after plague...

And Pharaoh says yes and then no and then yes and then no...

So they feel unsure and unsafe.

And then Moses leads them through the Red Sea and the army that pursues them is defeated and it probably reassures them. / After all they break into song in chapter 15 after they have crossed over from slavery into the wilderness.

But then - - the wilderness is a challenge.

And they need reassurance again...

They are hungry - - and they are thirsty.

So far it all makes sense to me.

In fact - - their need for reassurance is LESS remarkable to me - - than the fact that they actually accept it - - and keep going in spite of the challenges.

So what's a little grumbling??

At least they're still TRYING to follow Moses!

And Moses is trying to reassure them.

And that is what is going on in chapter 17.

They are thirsty, and Moses reassures them by getting water from a rock.

Do you think - - that any of them have CHANGED their impression of Moses by now?

Do you think any of them have changed their impression of GOD?

After all this assurance - - and challenge - - and then reassurance...?

Think about that, and let me ask you this:

How are you - - when it comes to FIRST IMPRESSIONS?

Can you tell, immediately, what a person is like, when you meet someone? Or does it take a while - to really get the picture?

OR - How about your OWN first impression - - what kind of an impression do you leave on someone? What about after they've known you for years?

Have you ever tried to - sort of - fool someone? Or had someone fool you?

I can remember people - - who I've called friends - - saying to me,

"Oh, I'm really terrible at this CARD GAME, I hardly remember the rules - -

- - and then - - there I am - - - feeling foolish next to them - - loosing.

BABYSITTERS - imagine the telephone rings and you hear, "Oh, yes, our little Johnny is such an ANGEL - - - won't you babysit Friday night - - - he really IS - just an angel."

Well, this sort of thing DOES happen - from time to time. / People say things like this -
 - - - or WE do. / BUT, I think that for most of us - - - MOST of the time - - - our real self - is
 pretty near the surface.

Or is it?

Is there any UGLY stuff inside of you?

Maybe - - if we're honest - - we can all ADMIT - - that we're made up of GOOD and
 BAD. / Remember that old movie - - "the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" - - maybe it's the
 truth about us all.

And then - - what happens when that ugly stuff - - happens more and more often?

Well, there IS GOOD inside of each one of us. / No matter WHO we are.

A UNIQUE creation - - which God looked down upon and said, "It is good".

We are ALL created GOOD - - as difficult as that sometimes is to believe.

Because there's also BAD stuff - - - - stuff we're still working on.

Things are just - - not the way we would like them to be - - ugliness.

The question is - - can we be HONEST about that stuff?

Can we tell the TRUTH - - when we're hand in hand with the POWER of God.

Sometimes - - - people manage to HIDE their UGLY stuff - - for a LONG TIME.

But you know what - it doesn't go away.

And you do know - - that it CAN be forgiven - - right?

Maybe that's the point where we all need some reassurance about now.

Think about something recently - - or someone - - or someplace - - where you
 experienced ugliness - - or meanness. / Surely we can all think of examples...

Recently our culture has been filled with violence and hatred.

Maybe it's a protester - - or a rioter - - on whatever side...

Imagine what your FIRST IMPRESSION was - - of any of them.

Do you think their - - neighbors would be shocked?

What do you think their families would think?

Recently there was an article about former senator Bob Packwood in the Oregonian.

Senator Packwood made a pretty good first impression.

But after multiple accusations of sexual misconduct - - things changed.

No amount of reassurance - - could counteract his abuses.

And do you know who helped bring the TRUTH to light?

Senator Mitch McConnell.

Both Republicans.

It's difficult to imagine something like that happening today.

I found myself wondering - - as I thought about - - people who have tried to COVER UP some UGLY part of themselves - - I found myself wondering about WHAT PARTS of ourselves we try to cover up.

Do we ever - - - COVER UP our FAITH - - and the GOOD we have inside ourselves - - - do we cover up - our LOVE for God - - - LIKE others try to cover up their CRIMES?

Do we confess our faith in Jesus Christ boldly?

Are we SURE - - of what God is calling us to do and say?

Are we willing to tell the TRUTH - - and ASSURE others?

We live in a time - - and as a people - - in need of REASSURANCE.

That's what I think.

If there is any connection between the ancient Hebrews in the Exodus story - - and us in the present - - it is that. / We have lived through some challenging times. / And we struggle with trust. / We struggle with finding and telling the truth to one another.

The HOPE I see in the story - - is that - - reassurance IS given.

The FOUNDATIONAL story of God's presence with the COVENANT people is that.

It is NOT that God sets up the covenant and that is it.

It is renewed - - over and over again.

And this moment at the rock - - at Massah - - and Meribah is that.

It is a moment of REASSURANCE.

The people needed reassurance.

“Is the Lord among us or not?” they asked.

And Moses struck the rock - - and the WATER - - was God's “Yes”.

Do you know the old expression:

“You can't get blood from a turnip”?

Well - - maybe not - - but it turns out you CAN get WATER from a ROCK!

The expression about the turnip is often used in reference to money, as in:

You can't get someone in poverty to pay - - no matter how ruthless you are.

Originally the expression may go back to Cain and Abel. / In the fourth chapter of the book of Genesis - - at the very beginning of the Bible - - Abel brought an animal sacrifice and Cain brought a vegetable. / Because Abel was a herder and Cain tilled the ground. / And it says that God preferred the animal sacrifice - - which yielded blood.

And this set up the fundamental rivalry of all time.

Sibling rivalry - - and distrust of one another.

No matter how hard we try - - we can't be who we are NOT.

Cain cannot be Abel - - and Abel cannot be Cain.

Just like we all struggle as human beings - - to get along.

And so - - we need reassurance.

The Biblical text for this morning reminds us that we are NOT ALONE in this.

The old hymn "Blessed Assurance" describes assurance as a FORETASTE of glory.

It may be - - that ASSURANCE is difficult to come by in this life.

And so in the mean time - - we need REASSURNACE.

We need to reassure one another - - who we are and what we believe.

We need to reassure one another - - that we are there for each other.

And as we do - - hear the reassurance from the Old Testament:

The Lord IS among us.

Believe it or not.

HOPE - - triumphs - - over negative first impressions.

HOPE triumphs over the expectations of chaos growing from our history.

There is a story about a church STEEPLE - - in Pittsburgh - - which illustrates how HOPE can triumph - - over the EXPECTATIONS of history...

There was a long HISTORY between two families. / A woman whose father had been minister of a single church for 55 years - - - met the SON of the Ketchup tycoon, H.J Heinz. / Heinz had been a member of her father's church, but had LEFT because of a disagreement.

The argument had smoldered between the two families for years.

Then - - a NEW STEEPLE was erected on the old church - - - in honor of the 55 year minister. / In attendance at the ceremonies for the steeple were the daughter of the minister, and the son of Heinz. / Both fathers now having passed away.

HISTORY might expect them to barely speak.

But they each had HOPE for something else.

They walked up to each other, and ONE said, "You know, I think YOUR father was right". / Then the OTHER said, "No, I think it was YOUR father, who was right."

And with these words, HOPE triumphed - - over history.

As the Israelites - - in the wilderness - - feeling lost and thirsty - - feeling like the LOOSERS that they had always been - - suddenly find that there is WATER in the wilderness - - they ALSO find that HOPE - - IS - - beginning to TRIUMPH - - over their HISTORY of slavery - - and oppression - - and wandering.

What is YOUR personal history like?

What do you HOPE for?

There IS hope - - held out to each one of us - - for whatever situation we have in our lives in which - - there seems to be such a HISTORY of things going wrong.

There is HOPE - - held out to us by Jesus Christ.

The HOPE comes - - when we let our INNER self - - and our OUTER self MATCH.

When we are HONEST with God. / Honest with ourselves and each other.

And from that kind of truth - - comes the beginnings of healing and trust.

I assure you of that.