

September 27, 2026

Exodus 17:1-7 “You Get What You Deserve”

When I was younger, I made a promise that I wasn't going to be one of those old people who complained about young people. I wasn't going to say that “kids have it off easy these days” or “When I was your age ...” I was *not* going to be the guy who sat on the front porch all day yelling at kids to “get off my lawn!” I'm part of Generation X for crying out loud. We're supposed to be the cool aunties and uncles who just let things go and not care. We're the ones who say, “Whatever.” And I am certainly *not* going to be one of those people who complain about younger generation's music. I appreciate *all* music.

But ... no one told me that there's a point in your life when it feels like someone flips a switch in your brain and then all those things that you said you'd never do? Well, there you are, you're doing them. And the Boomers laugh at me and say, “Yeah, that's what we said too! We were the hippies! Oooh, love and peace. Look at us now! Get off my lawn!”

So since our scripture from Exodus today is about complaining, here's *my* complaint for the day. And let me be clear. I recognize how hypocritical this is going to sound after leading a song called *Beat on the Drum*. Here's my complaint - I'm not a fan of “contemporary Christian music” these days. The songs seem so self-centered. “*I worship you. I praise you. I love you.*” What about “we?” It's like the idea of being a body of believers who worships together has been thrown out the window in favor of having it all about “me.”

And it's *so* repetitive. There just doesn't seem to be any substance. It's a lot of “I love Jesus, Jesus loves me, Jesus died for me, I hope I'll get to heaven.” It gets old. I knew a preacher's kid in high school who grew up to be a Covenant Award winning musician in Canada. That's like the Grammys of Contemporary Christian Music up north. She wrote some thought-provoking songs that inspired self-reflection. They told stories of the struggles of being a Christian in a world of injustice.

But her second album only had one thought-provoking song. The rest were praise songs. I knew her enough to ask her why the shift? She was brutally honest. “It’s what sells, and if they end up in a church song book the royalties are much better. That’s the only way you can make a living if you’re in the Christian music industry.” That’s when it occurred to me that I had become one of those grumpy old people in the church. “Back in the day, Christian music had substance! Not like this new-fangled ‘me-me-me’ praise music!”

With that being said, I want to visit a song written during the Golden Age of Christian music. The good ol’ days. This song was written by Keith Green, a free-spirited hippie who played with a lot of secular bands, but when he decided to follow Jesus, he started writing music about his faith. My favorite is *So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt*. It’s about the Hebrew people’s journey through the wilderness after being rescued from slavery in Egypt which is where we are this morning in our lectionary text. Here’s my favorite verse –

Well there's nothing to do but travel
And we sure travel a lot
'Cause it's hard to keep your feet from moving
When the sand gets so hot
And in the morning it's manna hotcakes
We snack on manna all day
And we sure had a winner last night for dinner
Flaming manna souffle

Oh, Moses, put down your pen!
What? Oh no, manna again?
Oh, manna waffles
Manna burgers
Manna bagels
Fillet of manna
BaManna bread!

Consider this -- God's people had escaped slavery. They had crossed the Red Sea. God provided them food in the wilderness, and still they asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Given what we've talked about over the last four weeks in Matthew's gospel, I want to be clear that this is not another story about people getting what they haven't earned. This is something completely different. It's about what happens when people get so overwhelmed by their circumstances that they begin to question whether God is with them at all.

Here's the question I want to put on the table this morning: What happens when our faith runs dry? What happens when *we* are the ones who are frightened, frustrated, impatient, and difficult? Think about these people out in the wilderness who have been taken out of the relative comfort and stability of their previous lives. You might say, "Wait, they were slaves in their previous lives! They were disposable labor for Pharaohs who wanted to build monuments to show off how successful and powerful they were. These people were abused. They were punished for minor offenses. They were ripped away from their families and lived by the whims of their masters. *Why* would they want to go back?" Because they knew that their bare minimum needs would be cared for. They would be fed and sheltered. And here they were in the wilderness not knowing how to survive outside the oppressive system that they lived under in Egypt. This generation of Hebrew people didn't know anything else. They didn't even know what to do with freedom.

And now, as they wandered around in an unfamiliar and sometimes dangerous place, their patience finally ran out. And we all know how people get when they're exhausted, hungry, frightened and are constantly dealing with one problem after another. People who were once reasonable become unreasonable. Often to the point where they started taking their frustrations out on Moses ... the very person trying to help them.

Now, I don't want to sound like I'm being unsympathetic with the Hebrew people. They were not wrong to be thirsty. I spent a few days in the Sinai Peninsula back in the 90s. It is a hot, dry, barren, and unforgiving place. The human body can go 40 to 60 days without eating, but it can only go 3 to 7 days without fluid. And these folks had thirsty cattle to deal with too! That's a genuine crisis. And so here's Moses who had been trying his hardest to lead these people through this became the target of the people's frustration. It got to the point where the people weren't just asking for water anymore. They were questioning Moses' leadership. They were accusing him of leading them into the wilderness to die. At least the Egyptians had a reason to keep them alive. They felt like Moses just wanted to watch them die of thirst. And finally, they started questioning whether God was even with them.

Here's something for us to consider this morning: Having a legitimate need doesn't mean we always respond to that need appropriately. We can be genuinely frightened but still say mean and hurtful things. We can have legitimate grievances and still treat others unfairly. And we can be people of faith and still wonder whether God has abandoned us.

But here's something I want you to notice about God's response to Moses and the Hebrew people: God doesn't tell Moses to deliver a lecture on gratitude. God doesn't insist that the Israelites apologize for their attitude before they get any water. God tells Moses to gather his elders together, and smack a rock with his staff. And what happens? Water comes out of it! Now -- Did the people deserve this water?

Good question. And I'd like you to think about that for a minute. I want you to think about how God responds to these people who some might consider ungrateful, and thus undeserving. For three weeks now, we've been talking about how we respond when others don't live up to our expectations. We want offenders to be punished. We want to limit our forgiveness to only those who deserve it. We want to *measure out* what we think others deserve.

Here's another thing I want you to consider – God doesn't wait for the Israelites to become better people before responding to their needs. Oh, well that's a great theological observation there pastor, but what am I supposed to do with this in real life? Okay. Let's consider a practical application –

How often do we run into people who are going through their own wilderness experiences and respond by judging their *behavior* rather than recognizing their *need*? Somebody is angry, and we decide they're just an angry person. Somebody is complaining, and we decide they're ungrateful. Somebody questions their faith, and we decide they just need to get their ... life together and trust God more.

But sometimes people are angry because they're frightened. Sometimes they're complaining because they're exhausted. Sometimes they're questioning God because their lives have become so difficult that they genuinely wonder whether God is even there at all. And maybe, before we start telling them what they ought to believe or how they ought to behave, we need to ask ourselves a different question: What do they *need* right now?

Maybe they just need somebody to listen. Maybe they need a meal. Maybe they need help paying a bill. Maybe they just need somebody to sit beside them and acknowledge that what they're going through is genuinely difficult. They might even need somebody who will *let* them complain for a while without correcting them. Because sometimes the most faithful thing we can do for somebody who's thirsty is to stop lecturing them about their attitude and just give them some water.

When someone is hungry, when someone is grieving, when someone is frightened or feels abandoned, we can step up and become an expression of God's presence. Wow, that sounds like a lot! In fact, it sounds a little pompous – like we can be God or take God's place in someone's life. But you know, sometimes the answer to "Is God among us or not?" is found in the person who shows up with water. *Be* that person.