

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**September 28, 2014; the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings:** Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32.

## **Is the Lord among us or not?**

We continue the journey with the Israelites today.

They are on a long journey in time and place but also a journey of the heart and mind and soul.

In the wilderness, everyone is tested and the many moments of uncertainty cause the people to ask, **“Is the Lord among us or not?”**

When I preached two weeks ago, we had just seen the Israelites escape Pharaoh’s army by the miraculous parting of the Red Sea.

You may know that scholars say that the body of water may have been the Sea of Reeds, which could have been crossed without a miracle, some argue.

Scholars debate such matters, as well they should, but for our purposes, we will consider the Exodus account as presented in the canon...as it has been delivered to us as presented in the Bible.

Because whether it happened this way or that way or not at all – it did happen for the Israelites in heart and mind and soul and it became a foundational account of their experience of both life and God.

And it happens for us...again and again...this journey of life with both uncertainty and moments of great certainty and faith.

Being human can be so difficult...we need basic stuff to stay alive.

I was reminded of this yesterday during PrideFest when I was standing outside in the heat and sun, and I realized that I needed some water right away (HoCo had a table at PrideFest again this year).

Do you know the rule of threes?

We can survive three minutes without air, three days without water, and three weeks without food.

Put anyone in a desert or the wilderness without an obvious supply of

water, and that person is going to get cranky.  
Being human gets pretty basic in some circumstances, which can be hard  
for most of us in this culture to remember, with plenty of fresh water  
for our use whenever we desire it.  
But we need to be mindful of God's great gift to us...the gift of water.

You might remember the forum Lorne Field gave in the spring about  
water on the planet and right in our backyard.  
Lorne is the Environmental Outreach Coordinator for Chesterfield County.  
I was able to hear him speak again at the Creation Care conference at  
Virginia Theological Seminary on Saturday September 20<sup>th</sup>.  
In his talk, Lorne teaches that even though it seems like we have a lot of  
water on the planet...we see so much water covering the earth...but  
most of that we can't drink as 97% is ocean water, of the 3%  
that is fresh water, 70% of that is frozen, 29% is  
underground, less than 1% is in lakes and rivers,  
and from that 1%, we get our drinking water.  
The water that we cannot live without for more than three days is a limited  
resource.  
How we interact with our environment now, and in the years to come, will  
determine just how limited.  
This is one reason, a primary reason, that our church through HoCo Eco is  
caring for our local water way, Jordan's Branch.

Do we see water as God's gift to us?  
I will return to this topic and say more next week when we observe St.  
Francis' Day, which invites us to consider our role as stewards of  
creation in which our animals live.  
We bless all animals by keeping the planet healthy as we are able, as it  
falls to us.

More on that next Sunday.

Back to the Israelites who did not need much information to know they  
needed water and that it was in limited supply.

They felt the need, and the need dominated their thoughts, so much so that it seems they forgot all that God had already done for them. They complain to Moses, who is wondering what God has gotten him into with these people, who say, “Give us water to drink...Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

Why, Moses, why?!

How can they ask why after all that God has done for them?

In addition to parting the Red Sea and saving them from the chariots, before we get to today’s story, God had already made water sweet for them to drink (Exodus 15, God has Moses put a piece of wood into bitter water to make it sweet), and in Chapter 16, the people complain of hunger and God gives them manna and quail.

God provides again and again, but the people seem to forget.

I think this happens to most people; we get caught up in our thoughts, in our present circumstances, and if things are not going well, we too might ask, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Remember Job?

Satan predicted that faithful Job would not give glory to God if things started to be wrong for him.

If you are not familiar with the entire Book of Job, it is worth reading it.

But you might not get to that right away so I’m going to spoil the ending for you—on his own Job is not able to stay positive, but God acts by connecting with Job in his misery thus making hope and peace, amid trouble, possible.

Connecting with God makes hope and peace possible, and it is God who reaches out to us, again and again, seeking our companionship.

And remember how things worked with the manna?

The people could not store large amounts of the flakey white substance that fell from the sky; when they tried to store it, it rotted.

God’s directions were clear—gather just what you need for today, and

tomorrow, more will be provided.

The only exception to the rule related to the Sabbath; since the people were not to work on the Sabbath, and so that they could be devoted to God on the Sabbath, they could collect a double portion of manna to see them through the day of rest.

But on this journey through stages, from slavery to freedom, the people were to depend on God and not stock-pile resources.

In the case of needing water, as we hear in our reading this morning, God instructs Moses to strike the rock and water flows out.

God provides in a most unexpected way.

The entire experience of life on this journey is one of learning to trust in God's care, in God's goodness.

Do we trust in God's love and care for us?

It can be easy when all is well, but challenges do test us, just as the Israelites were tested.

One of our challenges is minor in some ways compared to world problems, but it is important to us who worship here, come to concerts here, connect with God and each other here...and that is the heating and cooling system for this space, our primary worship area.

I'm not sure that I knew what "HVAC" meant until I came to Holy Comforter just over a year ago.

But I've learn...God knows, I've learned.

I've learned the history, and I've experienced it first-hand.

I lived through a winter with you all, and we had some cold mornings last winter...remember that?

I've learned that the HVAC system is basically the same one installed in the 1950s, with a few pieces replaced here and there and a lot of loving care from Bucky Oatts (may he rest in peace), holding this HVAC together for these many years...like Moses getting water from the rock.

We are thankful for the great care taken with the system and with this building but nothing can stop the march of time, the wear and tear of

the many years.

We had a forum about needing to replace the HVAC back in June. Many of you attended, and there was a great spirit in the room of wanting to come together to do what needs to be done. It was noted that a great spirit of hope rather than fear or anxiety was palpable.

We are going to build on that spirit just as we will build the new HVAC, and as odd as it might sound, this project has to potential to be a defining moment in our life together now and in setting the tone for years to come... setting the tone, the outlook, and subsequent actions that will shape our ministry together, what we are able to do for God and the world as the people of this faith community.

The wardens and I want to say a little more about this after the Peace, and members of the vestry will be available to speak with you following the service in the parlor, but as I will be setting up for and leading a training for our new youth acolytes during that conversation, I will say a bit more now and in the context of our theological reflection about the Exodus.

So there is some good news and some bad news.

But the bad news is really not that bad, and the good news is really good.

What do you want to hear first?

I'm going to give you the bad news first.

It is going to cost more than we thought when we spoke to you about this in June.

At that time we said \$200,000, as that was what we were being told.

The good news is it is not as expensive as the highest bid we got...which was about \$500,000.

The bid that we accepted was 331,000.

That is still a lot of money.

But the Holy Comforter Foundation and Vestry have been working together

on this matter for many months, and we have the money to pay for this.

Some might say... "but we can't spend that money."

"What will we do without it?"

Remember the manna...God's direction not to store the resources but use what God has provided, trusting that God will provide the next day?

Along with using what has been provide, we will also plan and work to replenish the investment funds as we are led to do by God.

Is the Lord among us or not?

That is the most important question.

We gather here week by week to strengthen our faith that God is among us...through our experience of God in Word and Sacrament, as well as knowing Christ in each other, through each other.

Being people who know that God is among us, we are able to continue the journey in faith, with hope and peace.

We are able to see, with the eyes of faith, that every challenge is an opportunity to grow in our trust of God. Amen.