



Sermon: Sunday, March 23, 2025

"In the Wilderness of Rephidim"

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 17:1-7 ¹From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" ³But the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Introduction: Rephidim

Today is the third Sunday of Lent. Even today, there are people living as nomads in many parts of the world, such as Mongolia and Siberia. They don't have enough water to drink, let alone wash. They move frequently in search of grass and water to feed their livestock.

The Old Testament considers the wilderness period, when the Israelites lived as nomads, as the actual origin of the Jewish faith. According to today's text, the Israelites came to the Desert of Rephidim. However, the problems the Israelites experienced while living in the wilderness after the Exodus are repeated. It was that the Israelites had no water to drink. Today's text, Exodus 17:3, said: **'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'**

This one sentence reveals the thoughts of the ancient Israelites. They complained about the **'Exodus.'** In fact, the Exodus was something that the ancient Israelites desperately yearned for. The Exodus was an event in which the Israelites fully experienced the life and love of God. However, the Israelites complain about their Exodus.

There is a part of the Israelites' resentment that is understandable. The area where the Israelites lived as a minority in Egypt was Goshen, a granary area along the Nile River. Even though the policy of oppressing ethnic minorities was often implemented in Egypt, it did not greatly affect their ability to make a living. They escaped from Egypt with Moses' persuasion, but now they face a crisis of survival they could not even have imagined. So the Israelites deny God's command, the Exodus itself.

Humans have no choice but to become servile in the face of this problem of making a living. What we eat and drink in our daily lives is very important. As Christians, we must strive and fight to create a world where there are no people who cannot eat or drink properly. However, because of the difficulties of making a living, we should not doubt the essence of life, which is liberation, freedom, peace, and rest given in a relationship with God.



Body: Disbelief toward the Lord

In this situation, Moses cried out to the Lord, **‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’** The Lord told Moses how to solve this problem. Moses takes some elders of Israel and goes to the rock on Mount Horeb, take in his hand the staff with which he struck the Nile River. (Exodus 17:6). According to Numbers 20:1-13, which is a parallel passage to today's text, Moses struck the rock twice with his staff, and water came out abundantly, and the Israelites and their livestock drank.

When some Christians look at this incident, they focus on the fact that the water broke out at Meribah. In other words, we pray and hope that the Lord will perform miracles for us just as He did miracles for the Israelites. This is the same faith of the Israelites and leaders who told Jesus to show a sign. If we look at today's text from this perspective, this will miss the point of the text.

We must meditate deeply on Exodus 17:7 to understand the core of the text. Exodus 17:7 said: **‘He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’”**

The name Meribah in today's text is derived from the legal term **'rib (רִיב)**', which refers to a legal dispute or controversy between two people. In other words, the name of this place became Massah or Meribah because the Israelites tested God and argued with Moses (Exodus 17:1-7). In this verse, the Hebrew word Massah comes from the word **'nasah' (נָסָה)**, which means 'to test or try', and was given the name because the Israelites tested to see if God's presence was with them (Exodus 17:7).

The point of today's text is not that God miraculously made water pour out of the rock, but rather a warning about the resentment and disbelief that the Israelites showed when their lives did not turn out as they had planned.

This warning from the Lord is also found in Psalm 95, which mentions the Meribah incident.

Psalm 95:8-9 said: **‘Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did.’**

The Old Testament saw the root cause of quarrels and resentment among people as distrust toward God. They thought it happened because they are not sure that God is with them.

But we can sympathize with this attitude toward life of the ancient Israelites. This is because the life problems they had to face were so difficult and desperate. It was difficult for them to be convinced that God was with them based solely on the ten plagues that occurred in Egypt and the Red Sea incident in the past. For them, miracles and signs had to be repeated. Without these miracles and signs, they are anxious. The anxious hearts of the Israelites cause them to fight with each other, place blame, and doubt God.

So how can we avoid repeating these mistakes? Also, what is the main point of the Rephidim wilderness story? I would like to say two things.

First, it is most important to experience God's signs and miracles in our daily lives. Miracles and signs are all around us. However, we often do not see these miracles and signs because our eyes and minds are preoccupied with other things. The miracles and signs around us are what we can see when we awaken from the sleep of our souls.

After a long winter, spring has arrived in Iowa. How do you accept the spring rain? Spring rain is also a miracle of miracles. Even a single flower blooming in spring is a miracle and a sign. Also, the fact that we worship together is a sign and a miracle. Furthermore, even a single daily meal of bread is a miracle and a sign. There is nothing in our lives that is not a sign or miracle. In other words, all things are a mystery. People who know this do not blame others. And we do not test God.



Second, people who experience signs and miracles in their daily lives, that is, people who experience the mystery of life, live with a sense of **‘inner fulfillment.’** This is a sign that God is with us in our lives. So, people who have a sense of inner fulfillment do not test God under any circumstances, even if they have a severe lack of water to drink, like the Israelites did in today's text. They have no doubt that God is with them and loves them.

However, some people may not agree with what I say. I ask those people. What are the specific difficulties that endanger your life so much that the term inner fulfillment sounds empty? Are you suffering from financial difficulties? Are you lonely because all your beloved family and friends are gone? Or are you worried about getting old, losing strength, or getting seriously ill? So, do you want to fight and complain with others because of numerous problems, and even go so far as to argue with God?

I don't know everything about how heavy the burden of life these people have to bear, but I fully sympathize with them. When difficulties come to me, it is painful to endure and overcome them. However, just because I sympathize with the difficulty of overcoming the difficulties we face in life does not mean I agree with it. This is because the life we can experience through trusting in the Lord is on a completely different level from solving difficult problems we face and enjoying temporary happiness.

Conclusion: The Lord is always with us.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! If you clearly know and experience the fact that God is with you, and if you go deeper into it step by step, our lives will not collapse even if we run out of water to drink. The Holy Spirit will give you amazing strength to endure difficult situations.

Is it difficult to believe and accept this? If so, it's probably because you haven't had any real experience of going down to the bottom yet. However, what is so fortunate is that there is someone who was unfairly brought to the bottom of life. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, awaits us at the lowest point of our lives and now of death. So, don't worry about life ahead of time, but rather trust and rely on Jesus more. The Lord is always with us in our lives. **Amen!**

