

Sermon – Refugee Sunday 3/19/2017

Texts: Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:5-42

Pastor Julie Recher

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. **Amen.**

(Taking a sip of water out of water bottle) Sometimes there's nothing more satisfying than a gulp of water. I've been super parched lately with all the heaters running inside and the winds whipping outside. Water is the stuff of life – 65% of the human body is water and you can't live without it for more than a few days. Has anyone ever traveled to a place where you couldn't drink the water out of the tap? (hands up) How about not have access to water in a tap at all? (Hands up)

Those of you who've had those experiences might get this more, but I'd like to do a thought experiment with you all – let's wander with the Israelites in the wilderness for a few minutes. Shut your eyes, and envision yourself amongst a group of maybe thousands of people, walking in the middle of nowhere. No greenery around, just dirt or sand, no water or signs of life around you other than the people and livestock walking with you. You glance at the person next to you as you walk, and they have the same tired expression, chapped lips, red face that you imagine on yourself. You think back to where you started – Egypt. There you were treated like animals, only valuable for the work you could provide, but at least you had the basic necessities of food and drink, and permanent shelter. But, your children were not safe in that place; you had watched as your most recent born was slaughtered by an Egyptian soldier simply because he was a boy.

You remember Moses showing up and making it sound like we'd be set – he'd free us from Egypt and take us to a place of our own. What a sick joke – we've been walking for what seems an eternity in a barren landscape that provides nothing - nothing to hunt or graze from, no water sources, not even shade. Provisions ran out weeks ago, so God's been sending this weird flaky stuff in the morning to make bread, but hasn't been providing daily water. The sun is oppressively hot, and we just keep walking and walking. We all feel sucked dry, emotionally as well as physically, from the fear of not getting what we need. We've even forgotten the way water feels in our mouths. Our children look like they're on the verge of collapsing. We're going to die of thirst, if nothing and no one else gets us first. So what do we do? What do you do?

You can open your eyes. Anyone thirsty? The Israelites complained a LOT on the journey from slavery to freedom, but they had good reason to – in the wilderness, they faced very real dangers lacking sources to their most basic needs. They looked

back to times in Egypt with nostalgia, thinking that perhaps it would've been better to stay. They were refugees fleeing oppression but longing for some kind of stability and security. And yet, through their fear and complaining, God provided for their needs all along the way, not always as they would've expected or even wanted.

Now, thousands of years later, we still remember this story, though not as vividly or as often as we could. Indeed, the Jewish people still celebrate and remember the escape from Egypt and God's help in their Passover Seders, a small piece of which we carry into our own worship as Jesus's last meal. This story of the refugees wandering in the wilderness is our story too – anyone who claims Christian faith has been adopted into this ongoing story of God's people from the beginning of time. These ancient ancestors of ours were refugees. Perhaps some of our more recent ancestors or even we ourselves were refugees at one time or another.

Refugees are people who flee their homeland because of a very real threat to their life, whether that be direct threats of murder or violence because of ideology, or lack of resources, or simply living in a war zone where they might and probably will be caught in the crossfire. They flee extremely dangerous circumstances, wandering into a wilderness in which they do not know where their necessities will be coming from or what hidden dangers lurk, but hoping and praying that where they are going is better than from where they've come, and risking everything for the chance at survival.

God provided in the wilderness for the Israelite people, and in turn called them to provide for the stranger, the resident alien, the foreigner. We too receive that call as God's people – God commands in Leviticus 19 “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.” (33-34, NRSV) God calls on their memories of the oppression they experienced in Egypt not to emulate but rather to break the cycle, to act in compassion rather than dominance, out of love rather than fear, because God cares for the foreigners just as much as the Israelites. God cares for the refugees just as much as us.

God also doesn't ask us to do something God hasn't already shown. Jesus meets a woman at a well and is himself thirsty, but he provides the woman who he's not even supposed to be talking to with living water. After her conversation with him, living water gushes from her heart into her proclamation all over the town, enticing others to that well, Jesus himself. Jesus promises us that same living water that will gush forth from us like a spring. I don't know about you, but despite the promise I find that I'm still thirsty. We all need to keep coming to the well to meet Jesus, to take a taste of that sweet living water once again, to be reminded of God's continual care and our call to extend that care, to be reassured and refilled for the journey in order to look outward and care for the stranger, alien, foreigner.

Here we reconnect to the flowing waters refreshing that spring in our hearts to pour out on our neighbors. We learn together how our neighbors, strangers, foreigners need God's care and are equipped to be conduits of that living water for the world. We pray together for those we cannot see, and we give to help the refugee we cannot reach with our own hands. God pours into us, so that we might pour into others. We are no longer refugees because God has provided for us, calls us beloved children, and brought us home. May we extend our circle of home and neighborhood to include our refugee brothers and sisters. Amen.