

## **“The Miracle Worker”**

A lady was walking down the beach on the New Jersey shore with her grandson. The grandson, a small boy of about 8, was wearing his New York Giants football cap. They were putting their feet into the water and enjoying time with each other. All of sudden a large wave came in and took the boy out into the ocean. The lady could not see him. She raised her arms towards heaven and cried out, “O God, bring back my grandson.” In a few minutes, a large wave came in and deposited her grandson on the shore. She looked up towards heaven again and said, “Where’s the cap?”

This story illustrates how some people just can’t be pleased. In the sermon passage today from Exodus 17:1-7, the Israelites are once again complaining because there is no water to drink. Even though Moses clearly cannot produce water himself, they have filed a complaint against him for what they view as his ineffectiveness and incompetence. They once again accuse Moses of having caused their death by instigating the Exodus. They once again challenges Moses’ leadership and show a lack of faith in Yahweh in spite of what Moses and Yahweh have already done for them.

Moses reprimands Israel not only for criticizing him but for continuing to test God. He proclaims his innocence and is completely frustrated with the people. He petitions Yahweh not for the well-being of the people but for his own safety. He does not want to be assaulted. He has had enough.

Yahweh responds by directly addressing the people's problem of thirst. Moses will use his staff to give life-giving water for Israel. God assures Moses that God will be standing alongside Moses. Several things emerge in this narrative. First, there is the staff, which Moses used before in Egypt to illustrate God's power. Second, there is the rock which will produce the water. Third, there is the courage of Moses. Fourth, there is the witness of the elders. Fifth, there is the guarantee of Yahweh.

Yahweh tells Moses to strike the rock and water will come out so the people may drink. We are not told if the water came out. We can conclude that it did because Moses did so by striking the rock. What is certain is the speech of Yahweh. We can be assured that if Yahweh says it will happen, it will. Only Yahweh can give the resources of life, but Yahweh will do so through the work of Moses.

We once again have a wonder and miracle of God. One would think that the narrative would end with a celebration by the people of the life-giving water from

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Yahweh. Remember the praise from Miriam and Moses after the defeat of Pharaoh's army. But here the focus is on the continued complaining and testing of God by the Israelites. There are ongoing issues of faith and unfaithfulness. We have a right to complain to God, but it becomes a lack of faith when we do not continually trust God. Israel should have known and trusted God without another miracle. Yet, they kept asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

The only evidence of Yahweh's presence that Israel will accept is concrete action that saves it. The lack of water was interpreted as evidence of the absence of the Lord. Israel is arrogant and attempts to make Yahweh perform at Israel's request.

Do we want to put God in a box, continually testing God by demanding a concrete result? This story can be understood as a critique of utilitarian religion in which God is judged by desired outcomes for the asking community. We must not fall prey to the modern-day prosperity Gospel, in which people expect God to give them something to prove he is there. People expect God to provide them with their favorite car or a new house. Television evangelists want a new jet to do their work.

This thinking is not new in America. The Puritan work ethic has always been present. This is the idea that if one has God in their lives, then they will be blessed and have many resources. The problem with this type of thinking is it

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causes people to put work and material acquisition above God. It also raises a very serious ethical problem by treating people who are poor or without resources as being without God's presence.

The temptation to reduce religion to utilitarian effect is the problem with which the book of Job struggles. In the end, the whirlwind speeches of Job assert that the reality of God is not commensurate with human prosperity. The text today provides the grounds for the criticism of communities of faith that seek to "program" the capacity of God to do the wonders required by the communities.

This criticism does not mean that we cannot expect miracle or wonders from God. The story provides a model that is many times repeated by God and in the saving miracles of Jesus. One commentator points out that the story today uses the same structure which is used as the standard form for television commercials in the United States. The problem is presented, a need is boldly voiced, and there is a happy resolution of the problem. In Exodus, there is a happy resolution of the problem through a gift from God, which in this case is water from a rock struck by Moses.

We see this structure in American advertising, especially in commercials for drug companies. Someone has a serious disease, such as diabetes or congestive heart failure or high cholesterol. They need something to take care of this problem.

The commercial suggests they take a certain drug. Once the drug is taken, the commercial portrays them as happy, frolicking on the beach and smiling without any cares in the world.

The derivative TV use of the story today and its structure falsely substitutes for God “the product.” The problem may be loneliness, stress, illness, bad odor, or lacking in something. When the “product” is used, life is powerfully transformed to one of companionship, calmness, prosperity, peace, joy and well-being. An evangelical critique of such advertisements is that they are in principle false. Although a product may deal with the presenting problems, it cannot in fact generate the joy and well-being that are characteristically promised. Thus, the biblical claim in the structure today is not only formal, but is also a substantive claim that only the intervention of Yahweh can work a miracle. There are no other miracle workers.

An additional lesson for us today is that we must respect our leaders. Moses was critical of the Israelites at the end of the story by pointing out that they continued to question the presence of Yahweh when certain miracles were not occurring. We can expect God to do miracles but our faith needs to be such that we always believe God is present with us, regardless of the circumstances. Do we unfairly criticize our leaders when things are not going well? Remember, an attack

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on a leader can be viewed as personal and negative. Moses feared for his well-being. When you are the critic, is your criticism framed in constructive ways or are you like the Israelites, grumbling and complaining, without offering suggestions for changing the situation?

As for leaders, how do you handle criticism and complaints? You must ask, when you make a decision, what vision shapes the way you make your decisions or how you interact with your critics? Many of you are leaders in the church. The reality is that at some point you will receive criticism. Remember that God is with you. Remain courageous. God will work through you as he worked through Moses.

As we close today, let us think of the words of our closing hymn, “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” God has been our help in ages past, whether through miracles or not. God will be our hope for years to come. Our faith should be such that God will be our guide through our life not matter what is happening to us. Only God can give us the true joy we need.