

Sunday, March 8, 2026

Third Sunday in Lent A

Exodus 17:1-7

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

My friends,

One of my favourite lines
from one of my favourite movies is quite short.
It is simply,
"I hate waiting."
That's so relatable.
I, too, hate waiting.

However,

unlike Inigo Montoya,
I've never waited for a masked man
to climb a deadly cliff
so I could attempt
to honourably kill him with the sword.

But I do hate waiting.

I've never been fond of those in-between times.

Being stuck in the middle.
Waiting.

Israel, in our Old Testament Lesson, is waiting.

Israel is existing in the 'in-between.'
God has delivered them from slavery.
Egypt is behind them.
The Promised Land lies ahead.
But they are not there yet.
They are in the wilderness.
They are in the 'in-between.'

They are free.

But their new freedom
hasn't made everything perfect.
They have new problems.
Big problems in the desert.
Big problems in the in-between.

Freedom does not yet mean ease.

Redemption does not yet mean comfort.
There's no water.
And desperate thirst makes faith hard.

We know this in-between, too, don't we?

We, too, live in-between.
We are delivered from the kingdom of darkness.
But we do not yet live in the new creation.
We are justified,
but still suffering.
Redeemed,
but sometimes still thirsty.

And you know what?

This in-between wilderness exposes what is in the heart.
What will it reveal in us?
Will it reveal the griping grumbling of unbelief,
or the glad gratitude of faithful prayer?

I.

My friends,

In Exodus Chapter 17,
we find Israel in crisis.
There's no water.
Have you ever been desperately thirsty?
Mouth dry, lips cracking?
It's no picnic.

They're miserable.

Their children are crying.
 Their flocks and herds are lowing.
 They are suffering.

This is real danger.

A true reason to fear.
 Water is life and death.
 So how do they respond?

*"Therefore the people **quarrelled** with Moses
 and said, 'Give us water to drink.'
 And Moses said to them,
 'Why do you **quarrel** with me?
 Why do you **test** the Lord?'
 But the people thirsted there for water,
 and the people **grumbled** against Moses
 and said,
 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt,
 to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'
 They **tested** the LORD by saying,
 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" (Exodus 17:1-3,7b)*

Notice, they do **not** pray.

They accuse.
 They plot.
 They test.

This is not mere thirst.

This is unbelief.

Psalm 95 recalls this very moment.

*"Today,
 if you hear His voice,
 do not harden your hearts,
 as at Meribah,
 ...when your fathers put Me to the test
 and put Me to the proof,
 though they had seen My work." (Psalm 95:7–9).*

This historical event is a warning to us.

"Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah."

The in-between wilderness
becomes a mirror for every generation.

Do we too sometimes ask:

Is the Lord among us?

Does He see?

Does He care?

Why does He permit this?

Our grumbling may be quieter.

But it is real.

What makes it hard for you to trust God right now?

What are you stuck in the middle of?

This desert of the in-between has big problems.

- Health problems?
- Mental health issues?
- Pain?
- Suffering?
- Tragedies and disasters?
- Family problems?
- Relationship tensions?
- Temptations?
- Failures?
- Financial pressures?
- Work stress?
- Church struggles?
- Cultural decay?
- Societal pressures, peer pressures?
- Political polarization?
- Loneliness?
- Wars and rumours of wars?

You face and will face real issues in this world.
Heartbreaking problems.
Life and death matters.
Difficult decisions your whole future
may seem to hang on.

So what are you going to do?
The in-between wilderness reveals
whether we will pray—
or grumble.

But what is grumbling?
Grumbling is entitled complaining
instead of humble asking.
It is complaining about God
instead of speaking to God.
It is taking our frustration with God
out on others.

Grumbling attacks God's people
instead of turning to God.
It gathers others into discontent
against God and His Church.
Sometimes so far
as to spread false accusations, slander,
and half-truths
about God's servants
to get what we want.

Grumbling demands instead of trusting.
It accuses instead of waiting.
It blames instead of praying.
It may try to force God's hand:
"Do what I want,
or I won't believe."

It doubts His presence
 because He is not present
 in the way we desire.
"Is the Lord among us or not?"
 the Israelites demanded—
 even while He led them
 by pillars of cloud and fire.

Grumbling is the opposite of gratitude.
 Grumbling is the voice of resentment.
 Grumbling is the opposite of faith.
 And we are all guilty.

II.

My friends,
 We are all guilty.
 However,
 our God is merciful.
 And He makes us new.

Israel deserved rebuke.
 Israel deserved death in the desert.
 But instead,
 God gives them water.

*"So Moses cried to the Lord,
 "What shall I do with this people?
 They are almost ready to stone me." (Exodus 17:4).*
 And the LORD answers him.
 With some of the elders,
 Moses passes by the people
 who are eyeing stones to throw.
 Moses walks up to the Rock at Horeb.
 And there on the Rock,
 the LORD is standing.
 He **is** there.
 He **is** with them.

And Moses strikes the Rock.
He strikes it in the sight of all Israel.
And water flows.
The people live.

Judgment struck—but not them.

The New Testament reveals the depth of this moment.

1 Corinthians chapter ten says,
*"for they drank from the spiritual rock
that accompanied them,
and that rock was Christ."* (1 Corinthians 10:4)
The Rock was Christ.

Jesus is the One struck for His people.

On the cross, Jesus cried out, *"I thirst!"*
Jesus bore the punishment for our grumbling.
He entered our suffering
and took our punishment.
He experienced a cursed death
in our place.
Jesus took the judgment
we deserve.

Romans 5 declares
that while we were still weak,
while we were still sinners,
Christ died for the ungodly.
From the cross flowed forgiveness.
The living water from Christ's heart.
Welling up to eternal life.
From the cross,
*"God has poured out His love
into our hearts
by the Holy Spirit,
whom He has given us."* (Romans 5:5).

God does not wait for us
to mend our grumbling ways.
He provides mercy in the midst of it.
He quiets it with His loving mercy.

And if the cross were the only gift—
that alone would be enough for eternal gratitude.
But He does more.
He provides for us
in the wilderness of in-between.

In John 4,
Jesus meets another thirsty soul.
In an age when women had little agency,
she's been divorced five times.
She's been used and betrayed.
She's living in shame.
She's living in exile.
In spiritual and communal drought.

And Jesus talks to her.
She comes for water,
and she finds the Rock instead.
And Jesus deals with her like a person.
And more.

Jesus offers living water.
Water welling up to eternal life.

And she moves
from avoidance to witness.
From isolation to proclamation.
From thirst to overflowing.
He brings her back into community.
He brings her back into faith.

The wilderness of in-between does not get the final word.
Christ does.

III.

My friends,
 We are still in the in-between.
 We are justified.
 We have peace with God.
 We stand in grace.

And yet: we experience suffering.
 But suffering is not abandonment.
 Nor is suffering the worst
 that can happen to us.
 Christians do not die
 to escape suffering.
 Suffering is formative.

*"We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.
 Not only that,
 but we rejoice in our sufferings,
 knowing that suffering produces endurance.
 Endurance produces character, and character produces hope.
 Hope does not put us to shame,
 because God's love has been poured
 into our hearts
 through the Holy Spirit
 who has been given to us." (Romans 5:2b–5)*

Suffering produces endurance.
 Endurance produces character.
 Character produces hope.
 And hope does not put us to shame.

Why?
 Because God's love has been poured
 into our hearts,
 welling up to eternal life.

In the wilderness,
 the question was:
"Is the Lord among us our not?"

At the cross, God answered: YES.
 In Baptism, God answers: YES.
 In the Supper, He answers: YES.
 In the preaching of forgiveness, He answers: YES.

The Lord is among us.
 The Rock was struck.
 And the water flows.
 Giving life as we walk
 through the wilderness.
 The Lord is among us.

The question now becomes:
 will we trust Him?
 Will we grumble against suffering—
 or go to Him?

We will go to Him
 in glad and grateful prayer.
 Because we know Christ will return.
 Because the Promised Land is certain.
 Because the New Heaven and Earth is coming.

And because
*"[God] will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes,
 and death shall be no more,
 neither shall there be mourning,
 nor crying,
 nor pain anymore,
 for the former things have passed away"* (Revelation 21:4)—
 the things we grumble about can become prayers.

Remembering the cross,
and looking forward to the new creation,
we can turn from grumbling
to prayers of trust and glad gratitude.

Instead of complaining to others,
we pray, "Lord have mercy."
Instead of accusing God,
we pray, "You are my Salvation."
Instead of demanding immediate relief,
we wait and endure with hope.
For the problems of yesterday,
today,
and tomorrow
will all pass away.

This is not naive optimism.
It is crucified confidence.
We know how the story ends.
No more thirst.
No more desert wilderness.
No more Meribah.
No more testing.

Only the loving, joyful presence of God.

*

My friends,
For now,
we live in the in-between.

The world is broken,
distorted,
corrupted,
and traumatized by sin.
There is cause to grumble.

But there is a greater reason to trust.

The Rock was struck.

Christ was crucified.

Water flows.

Grace abounds.

The Lord is among us.

And "*He is our God,*

and we are the people of His pasture,

and the sheep of His hand." (Psalm 95:7)

So today,

"Come, let us sing to the Lord!

Let us make a joyful noise

to the Rock of our salvation!

Let us come

into His presence

with thanksgiving!

Let us make a joyful noise

to Him with songs of praise!" (Psalm 95:1–2)

And when the wilderness

of in-between presses in—

Do not harden your hearts.

Wait patiently for the Lord.

Go to the Rock.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, amen.