"Massah, Meribah and The Cross" -- John 19:28

Lent 4 - March 13, 2002

The Fifth Word: "I thirst!"

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

Pastor Tim Pauls

I. Massah and Meribah

There they stand at Mount Horeb, far away from the land of Egypt; and you know what that means.

It means that after 400 years of slavery, the children of Israel aren't slaves anymore. It means that God has heard their prayers and sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt. It means that God has afflicted the impenitent Egyptians with plague after plague, calling them to repentance for Pharaoh's stubborn heart. It means that, by the blood of unblemished lambs, the firstborns sons have been spared from death at Passover. It means that all have been saved from death as they passed through the Red Sea on dry ground. It means that already, in the desert, when they have complained of hunger, the Lord has provided quail and manna for them to eat. They have witnessed all of these things; but along with what they have seen, they have the promises of God. He is not just leading them from, but to: To the Promised Land of Canaan, their new home. They have God's Word on it.

The congregation of Israel truly has been richly blessed.

On this day, the congregation of Israel is in a surly mood. They surround Moses with menacing scowls and angry eyes. They are camped at barren Rephidim, and there is no water to be found. But rather than remember past miracles or present promises, the Israelites are full of fear and discontent. They pepper Moses with angry accusations and demands: "Give us water, that we may drink." "Why is it you have brought us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" Moses notes as well that some of them are beginning to eye some stones in a rather alarming manner.

This is the work of the sin, which dulls the eyes and ears. Sin impairs one's sight: The sinner can't look back and recall God's gracious miracles in the past; instead, he can only see his present discomfort and problems. God is not to be trusted, unless He's done something lately. Sin also impairs one's hearing, so that the sinner doesn't listen to the promises of God. God is not to be trusted, unless He's doing something now.

So, instead of remembering the many miracles of the Exodus, and instead of reminding one another that God has guaranteed a Promised Land, the people of Israel panic and doubt. They thirst.

Moses responds. Called by God as a servant of the Word, He warns them with God's Law: "Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the Lord?" You see, there is a bigger problem than the lack of water and the physical thirst. The fact that the people are thirsty is not the principal crisis; no, the problem is a spiritual thirst. Rather than trust in the satisfying promises of God, they would rather contend with God because they are, at the moment, unhappy.

They may have just left the Wilderness of Sin. But sin still clings to them in all that they do.

Only the Lord can deliver them, so Moses rightly appeals to Him: "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!"

The Lord responds. He instructs Moses to take the elders and lead the people to Horeb. There, God will stand upon a rock. Moses is to take His rod and strike the rock. The people will no longer be thirsty.

Moses follows the Word of the Lord. He leads the people to Horeb. He takes his rod and strikes the rock, and water begins to flow: Enough water for all Israel, including the children and the livestock. Because of the gracious gift of God, the people are saved and satisfied.

Moses names the place Massah and Meribah: "Strife" and "Contention." The people contended with the Lord there, falsely accusing Him of being unfaithful. Yet the Lord did not abandon them there; He provided for them despite their sin.

Massah and Meribah, strife and contention. This will be the history of Israel in the Old Testament, strife and contention with God. In fact, this place called Horeb has another name: Sinai. In just a little while, Israel will contend with God and create a golden calf to worship. Instead of striking a rock, Moses will dash stone tablets to the ground, a dramatic statement that Israel has broken God's commandments.

But God will once again prove faithful, despite their sin. Why? Some might say, simply, "Because He is, after all, God." But we can refine that statement: God is faithful because these people are redeemed, redeemed because out of Israel the Savior will be born. He will die on the cross for their sin, strife and contention. Because He is coming to pay that price for the sins of the world, God shows mercy to His people at Massah and Meribah. It is all for the sake of Jesus Christ that they remain His people.

And so St. Paul testifies: "For they all drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ" (I Cor. 10:1-4).

II. Horeb and Calvary

It's on another hill and it's centuries later, but the people there have much to be thankful for.

They have witnessed another miraculous deliverance, one that makes the Exodus pale in comparison. In their lifetime, the long-awaited Savior has become flesh. Many have witnessed His miracles and listened to His gracious teaching. So that all might know the way, He has plainly and clearly testified to the truth: That He is the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah. He is there to bring them into the kingdom of heaven. He is there with forgiveness of sins. Everlasting life. Living water.

And as crowds once gathered around Moses in the desert, they are now gathered around Jesus.

This congregation, too, is in a surly mood. It is Passover week, the annual celebration to remind them of their deliverance from Egypt by the grace of God. But as this festival reaches its climax,

they've taken time off for a crucifixion.

This is the sin at its devilish worst, still blinding eyes and deafening ears. Rather than look back and remember the many marvelous miracles that the Lord has performed, the sinful mob around the cross looks only to the present as the Savior hangs on a cross, accused of being a criminal. Even if they do remember some wonders, they judge it far more prudent not to support Him right now. Furthermore, sin has twisted their hearing: Jesus has done nothing but tell them the truth, that He is the Son of God and Savior of the world. But rather than believe Him, they accuse Him of blasphemy instead.

There is great thirst there-spiritual thirst. Instead of living by faith, the crowd is motivated by anger, fear, jealousy, uninformed scorn. That's what the Old Adam does.

There's no need for them to pick up stones; they already have Him nailed to a cross. And there's no need for a Moses to serve as go-between with God: The Lord is there, crucified.

The crucified Lord speaks once again. Two words: "I thirst."

"I thirst." After the beatings, the labor and the bleeding, it's no surprise that He is thirsty. But as it was true back at Massah and Meribah, there is something else happening here: Jesus is suffering spiritual thirst as He takes the sinner's place on the cross. He is taking God's wrath for the Israelites who grumbled at Massah and Meribah. He is suffering God's punishment for the mob that scoffs below Him. He is dying for the sins of the world. He is dying for your sins, too.

Throughout the Bible, sinfulness is portrayed as thirst. We see it at Massah and Meribah. Later on, the prophet Isaiah calls out to Jerusalem, "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price" (Is. 55:1); Isaiah promises grace-free grace!-for all who repent. You may well remember our Lord's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, when He says, "…Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." (Jn. 4:14) Or His public sermon in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles, where He cries out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (Jn. 7:37-38).

The Lord has living water-forgiveness and life-to give. But to give us these things, He must take our sin, our strife and contention, upon Himself. To quench our spiritual thirst, He must become spiritually thirsty in our place and suffer God's judgment for our sin.

This is what happens on the cross, and so the Lord announces, "I thirst." Truly, he suffers physical thirst; but His cry also announces that He is the thirsty One, forsaken by God and suffering for the sins of the world, so that the world might be flooded with His grace.

All this is foretold way back at Massah and Meribah. When the people of Israel are thirsty and rebellious, the Lord commands Moses to strike a rock with his rod. One wouldn't think that a stick would do much to open a rock; yet by the Lord's will, that rod opens the rock's side, and water flows out for all. Centuries later, a Roman soldier approaches the crucified Savior with a spear. One wouldn't think that a lowly mortal could do much to the Son of God; yet by the Lord's will that spear

opens up the Savior's side, and blood and water flow out.

For all.

III. Blood and Water

And here we are, wandering for a while in this sinful wilderness. This world is not our home, for the Lord has died to make us His people, His Israel; and we look with eagerness toward the eternal Promised Land of heaven.

As long as we remain in the wilderness, there is still strife and contention. Sin still attempts to dissuade us from the grace of God by afflicting us with fear, anger, dissatisfaction, temptation, discontent. It still seeks to blind eyes and deafen ears.

So often, even for the Christian, eyes are overwhelmed with present woe and can see nothing else. Life itself is an ongoing gift of God, and the Lord showers blessings daily upon us for life in this world; yet it is all too easy to take such blessings for granted and see only the trouble. Such limited vision leads a sinner quickly to doubt God's mercy. Troubled by the woe of the world, ears don't hear the Word of God well either, listening instead for other solutions and quick fixes, quickly discounting forgiveness and looking for something else instead. Sin launches daily attacks and seeks to sap our faith; apart from the Lord, we are thirsty indeed.

The devil would have you blame this thirst on God, and thus abandon Him.

But as He was at Massah, Meribah and the cross, the Lord is still faithful. And as the Lord spoke at Massah, Meribah and the cross, He still speaks to you. He speaks to you His Word of Law, warning you of the devil's tricks and reminding you daily to turn from sin. He speaks to you His Word of Gospel, proclaiming that your sin has been taken away, because the Son of God has died in your place. He has thirsted for your sin. He has allowed His side to stricken open; He has allowed the water and blood to flow.

The water still flows. The Lord speaks His Word and adds it to water; and thus He floods your dry, dead bones in Holy Baptism-washing away sin and death, and giving you life and salvation.

The blood still runs. Because you will always battle sin and thirst in this wilderness life, the Lord speaks His Word and adds it to bread and wine. To His people, thirsty and hungry for grace and life, He declares, "Take and eat, this is My body - take and drink, this is My blood - for the forgiveness of sins."

Because He speaks these words of grace, He speaks to you the promise of eternal life: "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son" (Rev. 21:6-7).

We rejoice to hear this promise, for it is made for the sake of Jesus. He has died for our sin, our strife and contention. He has thirsted that He might satisfy us with grace. This wilderness of sin will end, and the eternal Promised Land is coming. Of this you can be sure, because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen