

“Striking The Rock”

Exodus 17:1-7

From 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.

The 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?”

But 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?”

So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people?

They are almost ready to stone me.”

The 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.

I 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.

He called the place Massah and Meribah,

because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD,

saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Striking The Rock

Exodus 17:1-7

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I.

The question set before us today is one which is rather straightforward: “Is the LORD among us or not?!?” For the Hebrews recently set free from generational slavery in Egypt, this was the question which burned within their hearts; and certainly burned within their throats. Simply put, they were figuratively, and even literally, dying of thirst; with Moses bearing the brunt of their fears and frustrations: “And the people complained against Moses saying, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt, (only) to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’”

Though we might be tempted to deem the Hebrews as ingrates in ignoring their recent liberation from bondage, not to mention the whole “horse and rider thrown into the sea” escapade as they fled Pharaoh’s army which was in hot pursuit and close at heel, these folks were reacting in a way any of us could; so let’s not fool ourselves into thinking otherwise.

II.

Born in 1908, Abraham Harold Maslow was an American psychologist who created what is now known as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs: a theory of psychological health predicated on fulfilling human needs which follows an innate and almost unavoidable priority. Often diagrammed as a pyramid (tangentially interesting give our text) the first priority, or level, is *Physiological Needs*: food, water, clothing, sleep, and shelter; the bare necessities needed for anyone to survive.



The second level of the pyramid is *Safety and Security*. Once a person's basic needs are satisfied, the desire for order and stability sets in. The third level, is *Love and Belonging*: being comfortable with and having connection to others that results from receiving acceptance, respect, and love.

III.

The fourth level, is the need for *Esteem*. Maslow put forth a "lower" version of esteem as the need for respect from others and may include a need for status, recognition, fame, prestige, and attention, while the "higher" version of esteem is the need for *self-respect*, and can include a need for strength, competence, independence, and freedom.

The fifth and final level of the hierarchy of need is *Self-Actualization*, and refers to the realization of one's full potential. Maslow describes this as the desire to accomplish everything that one can, to become the most that one can be. As Maslow said, "What a person can be, they must be."

IV.

This is not the first time I've mentioned Maslow in a sermon and, in all likelihood, it will not be the last; and for good reason. Our challenge as people of faith is to explore and enjoy our relationship with God which was made possible through the Cross of Christ. Every time we worship, study scripture, engage in prayer, care for those in need, and cultivate gratitude in our lives, we plumb the depths of this relationship between the Creator and, we, who have been created. While it is certainly important to understand what God *requires* of us, the low hanging fruit in this paradigm is to be gained in first understanding our *own* side of the equation.

To my theological and homiletical mind, Maslow's imperative, "What a person can be, they must be," begs the question "what, exactly, *can* a person be?" Understand, though, we are not talking here about *individual* abilities but, rather, what is the gauge of human potential in general? This morning, I'd like to suggest that the first step in answering *that* question, is answering the very same question put forth by the Hebrews in today's passage: "Is the LORD among us or not?"

V.

As you may have noticed, there is a great deal of change afoot in our congregation these days. Last week, Anthony joined us as our new Director of Music, and today we bid a fond farewell to Jarrett while welcoming Kathleen Crecco as our new Pianist.

In actuality, though, change is happening at our church *all* the time, noticed or not; *believe* me when I tell you. This morning, after worship, I am offering a repeat of the same New Member Class I offered last month. My sense is that later this spring we will welcome at least 10, and perhaps as many as 14 or 15, new members to the congregation. On any given Sunday we *expect* new folks to walk into the sanctuary...and they do; as was the case as recently as last Sunday. All of which is great, by any measure, and mostly unheard of in this day and age. The challenge becomes, then, to integrate all of these people, and their stories, into the ongoing story of this church.

VI.

Whether told around a campfire, in a book, over the airwaves, up on the screen silver or downloaded to a small screen, told in the next news cycle or down through the ages or, even, imparted from the pulpit, *everyone* loves a good story, or narrative; even if the ending is not always a happy one. Stories entertain us, inform us, distract us, engage us, educate and edify us, and reveal us to ourselves in ways which are both beautiful and bracing.

Though I cannot say if this is the case for any other church (you would hope) my quarter century here on the Park has shown me that *this* church is a place where stories can take root and unfold. Not just *any* story, however. Not just *other* people's stories, either. But, *your* story in particular.

VII.

This past week, Pat Mace and I had the opportunity to speak with Kathleen and began to learn a bit about *her* story. (*Sorry, Kathleen, we failed to mention that just about anything and everyone is fair game when it comes to the sermon; within the bounds of decorum, of course.*) A Crane graduate familiar with the North Country, for the past several years she had been living in the Buffalo area with her husband Andy and their kids Evelyn, Donovan and Desmond. This past Labor Day Weekend, however, certain opportunities presented themselves and in nothing less than a whirlwind, and in a staggeringly short period of time, found themselves selling their house, buying another, starting a new job, and moving lock, stock and barrel to a strange land and into a new life complete with all the joys and fears any such plot change necessarily brings with it. Beginning today, her story, and that of her family, will begin to weave itself into the story of this congregation as well.

VIII.

Five years ago, in 2018, we welcomed Jarrett Larson to the story of this church, along with his wife Marion, sister Kelcy and, later, children Nico and Rosie. We will be forever grateful for his magnificent piano playing, his work with the choir and the deep relationships he formed with its members and with so many in the congregation. Jarrett saw us through the challenges visited upon us by COVID, gifted us with a great deal of joy, and helped to guide us, successfully, to this next chapter of our church; even as he begins a new chapter in his own story.

We are tremendously grateful to Jarrett for all of this, and hold him and Marion fondly in our hearts for the way their family has touched our lives. Not to mention, the amusement and delight in remembering Nico weaving a Family Circus dotted-line path all over the sanctuary during the service every now and again; tons of fun.

IX.

This most recent twist in the story line, though, began with Dr. Anthony Eversole coming on staff last week as Director of Music; the most recent treasure to be unearthed in what has become our church's on-going embarrassment of riches when it comes to the position. Anthony also has quite the story, which his *nine* page resume clearly illustrates as it is chock-full of operatic roles, recitals, solo concert engagements, educational outreach, musical theatre roles, fellowships, scholarships and competition awards which have spanned the nation. The guy is a modern day troubadour.

When he and I first spoke, I attempted to paint a picture of what this church is like, and what he might expect from his time with us. I told him we are fun-loving bunch, supportive, generous and welcoming; and, that all those who have worked here have left with much more than a paycheck. I also told him that this a place where people come to *get it together*.

X.

The past couple of weeks I've been trying to work out a bump in the road in the relationship with another about whom I care deeply. At one point in a rather frank conversation I shared some things about myself which I typically do not. It isn't that I'm trying to hide such things, I just figure they are known

and assumed; namely, that I have my own struggles and that I, too, am just doing the best I can. That I would share this, as I was told, was very much appreciated. Afterward, it made me wonder if the rest of you might appreciate a similar disclosure.

This Wednesday, March 15th, marks 25 years of marriage for me and Linda. That we elected to get married on the Ides of March was no accident. Though I tell people it was simply in the hope of helping me remember my anniversary date (it hasn't) the truth is Linda and I decided it was both fitting and funny (watch out world). You see, Linda and I *had* to get married. Though not for the reason normally associated with such a statement; and, no, there was no shotgun involved.

XI.

However, when you are flying to Arizona for an interview to be the pastor of a church you can't really bring along your "girlfriend." So, we decided to get married. Which isn't to say we were not headed in that direction, but there was an *awful* lot going on back then and we just had not yet arrived at that point; and, then, that point arrived at us.

How we ended up not in the desert and sunshine of Arizona but, instead, 2,426 miles away in the opposite diagonal direction at the sleepy little town of Canton, NY nestled on the edge of the frozen tundra is, unfortunately, a story for another day. I can assure you, though, it was a real hand-of-God kind of thing. In those days, my edges were *quite* a bit rougher and *far* more pronounced. Yes, there was great potential, as 51 other churches apparently agree, but it was only *this* church, the 52nd in my job search, that decided such potential was worth the risk which necessarily came with it.

XII.

Given this, Linda and I arrived here with a *profound* sense of gratitude for the opportunity this church was affording us; beyond that, and 5 year old Nicole, we had very little. Actually, we had next to nothing. I had no money in the bank, no health insurance, no other job prospects and, between us, only enough furniture to fill two rooms in that huge manse (barely). Beyond clothing, my personal possessions included a stereo, a guitar and a 3/4 ton Chevy van with the seats removed and a bed in the back where I had been living. Oh, and the engine of the van blew as we pulled into the driveway.

Without putting too fine a point on it, this church was the best, last and only chance I had to get it together, professionally and personally, and I've been working hard at it every since. 25 years, in fact; with every year of our marriage spent here at this church and living next door in the manse. And what a gift they have been; a gift all of *you* have given to us and our family. Thank you.

XIII.

There comes a point in everyone's life, at least once but usually more, when we have to be about the business of striking the rock. A moment when, in all reasonableness, we should expect exactly *nothing* but instead, over and against all reasonableness, seek *everything* that might be possible; even, and especially, the most unlikely of outcomes. Like water flowing from a rock. A moment where decision culminates in action; when nothing is held back and all the chips get pushed to the center of the table. A moment when we decide our *own* answer to the question, "Is God with me, or not?"

If we answer the question in the negative, or if we simply are not sure, then we begin to scale Maslow's Pyramid of Need: seeking food and shelter, then safety, love and belonging, esteem and, perhaps someday, have an opportunity to self-actualize. In short, welcome to the wilderness of the world.

XIV.

However, if by chance, destiny, fortune, fate, fearlessness or faith, we answer the question in the *affirmative*, that God *is* among us, and with us, and *within* us, then we flip Maslow's Pyramid of Needs completely upside down such that it becomes a Pyramid of Gifts. *Self-Actualization* becomes our *starting* point. We recognize our full potential in having already been called and claimed as the children of God. It is not a goal toward which we must strive, climb or hope; it is a gift freely given and already received. In knowing that God so loved this world that the Son was sent to die on the cross that we, YOU and I, might live, how can we do anything other than respect ourselves?

When we are touched by, and filled with the Holy Spirit how can we not be strengthened, equipped, and find ourselves unbound by the fetters of this world? We have been set free like the Hebrews; not from the chains of slavery, but from the bondage of sin and death.

XV.

Such a freedom gives us the *breathing* room to welcome and foster love, invite connection to, and acceptance of, one another, and instills in us a comfort and a peace which passes all understanding. We come to discover that we *belong*; first to God and then to each other. Belonging gives birth to community and offers us a place of order, stability, and accountability which we can call our own.

We come home to ourselves and swing wide the doors to welcome not just our family, friends, and neighbors, but the stranger as well as we seek to ensure that everyone has the support they need to gain the bare necessities of food, water, clothing, sleep, and shelter not just so we can survive, but that we might also thrive as we make our way, together, through the wilderness that is this world.

XVI.

Finally, all these things, taken together, make for a pretty good story which has now taken root and is unfolding in each new moment. It is the story of how God first got us together, so we might get together with each other, and help one another discover we only get *it* when we get it *together*. This is not just *any* story, however. Neither is it some *other* people's story, either. Now, this is *your* story in particular. So I ask you, again *this* Sunday, "Is the LORD among us or not!?" Amen.