



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

September 25, 2012: Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Felipe Salinas

RCL: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

LM: Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9; Philippians 2:1-11 or 2:1-5;
Matthew 21:28-32

To say that water is essential to life is so commonplace that we don't often stop to think about how many in our world today do without it. In fact, the chronic lack of access to clean water is a key cause of hunger. Without water for drinking and preparation of meals, for cultivation of crops, or for cleansing and medical use, people will experience hunger. No wonder, then, that we often use the language of "thirsting" to describe human attempts to fill emotional or spiritual longings. To experience thirst is to know that we need something or someone other than ourselves. In spiritual terms, genuine thirsting leads to faith and trust in God.

In today's reading from Exodus, the Israelites experience real physical thirst: they have no water and they vent their fears and anger against Moses. Their quarrel with Moses (and Moses' quarrel with God) translates the concern about physical thirst into spiritual terms. So after Moses produces water from the rock, the place of desert thirsting is transformed into Massah and Meribah, the place of quarreling and of testing God. Crisis brings the Israelites into a new place, where they ask a fundamental faith question: "Is the Lord in our midst or not?"

In a world where 1.1 billion people lack access to improved water sources,ⁱ while those of us in richer nations take access to water for granted, where are we to find modern-day Massah and Meribah? Certainly there are those who, in their physical thirst for water, have a right to quarrel and may even be forgiven for wanting to quarrel with God. But Massah and Meribah may well be located elsewhere, among those of us who question God's presence "in our midst," who lack faith in God. In that lack of faith we too often choose not to work to ensure that water is made to flow from our modern "rocks" – misguided spending priorities, ignorance of hunger's causes and solutions, and lack of political will.

For decades, hundreds of *colonias* – unincorporated Texas communities located along the U.S-Mexico border-lacked basic water and wastewater systems. Residents were forced to truck in water from other sources and collect it from the scarce rain that occasionally falls in the area. Diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, and dysentery became more commonplace. Beginning in the early 1980s, grassroots community organizations were formed through church communities under the umbrella of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation Network. After years of leadership development of people with grade-school level of education, persistent advocacy, voter registration drives, and calling elected officials to accountability, results began to appear. By the late 1990s, through a combination of regulatory changes which ensure that future land developments include water and wastewater infrastructure, targeted state and federal funding, and local self-



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help initiatives, clean water started flowing into the homes of many of the nearly 500,000 *colonia* residents who continue to work for better living conditions.

The Scripture's quarrelsome mood continues in Matthew's Gospel, as religious leaders confront Jesus, intent on challenging the source of his authority. Like the Israelites in the desert, they, too, fail to see the Lord "in their midst." Jesus counters by asking their opinion of John's baptism: was it of human or divine origin? His questioners retreat, feeling caught between the two fears of hypocrisy and irrelevance. Their lack of conviction is telling, especially in light of the parable of the two sons that follows. What matters in God's eyes is not words but actions. Because they are preoccupied with self-image, the leaders not only fail to act on their convictions, but they are effectively silenced.

How well do our professions of faith measure up with our actions, especially in God's vineyard, where the harvest of justice awaits? Do we find ourselves in a quarrelsome mood, raising objections born of political expediency, impracticalities, or comfort with the status quo? Or, perhaps worse, do we shrink from even daring to engage God's Word out of fear that our political convictions may be challenged and even changed?

Paul's grand hymn in Philippians tells how God's very nature is poured out in the Incarnation. In this ultimate act of humility, Paul sees the perfect model for Christians. Jesus "did not regard equality with God something to be grasped" (v. 6, New American Bible [NAB]). Even more so, then, we should set aside our quarrels with God-voiced or silent-and be willing to "empty" ourselves. Emptying ourselves leads us to thirst for justice that can become reality for all God's people.

Children's Time

Written by Marc Miller

As the children come forward, hold in your hand a tall glass of water, with ice, and perhaps lemon as well. Make it look attractive! As you recount the story of Massah and Meribah, take an occasional sip from the glass. Explain how easily the Israelites could have died in the wilderness without water. Remind the children that they can get a drink anytime they wish, while many children in the world don't get enough water or have to drink polluted water. Invite the children to thank God for the gift of water and for the gift of Jesus, who calls himself living water (John 4:10). Ask them also to pray that one day all the world's children will have fresh, clean water to drink. By now they might be getting thirsty! Someone might bring out a tray of cups with ice water as the children depart-for once, they may truly relish water!



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Musical Suggestions

Prepared by Larry Hollar

O Love, How Vast, How Flowing Free – NCH 209

Change Our Hearts – GC 394

Song of Hope (Canto de Esperanza) – FWS2186

Reflection from Hunger for the Word, Year A

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ⁱ See the United Nations website, www.wateryear2003.org.