

Sermon (10/1/17, Exodus 17: 1-7):

On the religious calendar of our Jewish brothers and sisters, Sukkot or the Feast of Booths will begin on October 4th and last through October 11th. During this time, many Jewish homes will build a hut in their yards under which they will eat some or maybe all their meals. In stricter sects, the males of the family will spend the entire week in these huts, including sleeping in them at night. The exception is on those days when it rains...not light sprinkles, mind you, but heavy rain, ‘enough to thin your soup’ as the law describes.

The purpose of these booths or small huts is to remember. First, to remember the temporary huts farmers often lived in when tending to their fields, particularly during the time of harvest. And, secondly, to remember the temporary huts the Israelites lived in while they were on the move in the wilderness, moving from Egypt to the Promised land.

While living in New Jersey, a Rabbi friend of mine once invited me and another friend to come have lunch with her in her Sukkah during the season of Sukkot. To be honest, I wasn’t quite sure what a Sukkah was but it included lunch and rarely do I say ‘no’ to lunch!

Not knowing much about this holiday or the Sukkah they celebrated it in, I was a little surprised when she led us to a small, flimsy hut in the backyard with a picnic table under it. I couldn’t help but to feel a bit sad for my Rabbi friend. From the looks of things, her building skills were about as good as mine. This canopy she had built was in rough shape. A good stiff wind could easily take it down. It was cobbled together with a bunch of old sticks, some rope, and a few leafy branches for the roof.

Our story from Exodus 17 is a part of this wilderness journey that the Jewish holiday, Sukkot, recalls. Here, we again find the Hebrew people in a fury, quarreling with both God and Moses. As they set up camp in a place called Rephidim it immediately became apparent there was no drinkable water.

It’s difficult not to sympathize with their desperation. Water is such a fundamental need. They just completed another long stage of journeying in the hot desert only to now find there’s no water.

‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and

livestock with thirst?’ They ask Moses. Why, indeed.

Moses takes their complaint to God. ‘These people are about to stone me!’ he says. ‘What should I do?’

God tells Moses to take his staff in hand, the same one he used to separate the waters of the Red Sea, and go and strike the rock at Horeb. Water will come out of it. Well, sure enough it did. The people drank and celebrated and washed and cooled down...all was good.

To read this story in isolation might lead us to think that God has a bit of a mean streak. Of course, God did give them water but it was only after they complained and it was quickly followed by God and Moses complaining about their complaining.

We can’t read this story in isolation, though, because this is only part of the story for these people who spent most of their lives on the move. This stage of the journey was not the first time that the people were afraid, fearing they had come all this way for nothing as death knocked on their door. Before Rephidim, they had cried the same cry at another campsite when they were hungry and, in response, God sent them manna. And then, another time, they cried out when they grew tired of eating all those carbs.

‘Don’t you know, God, that carbs alone will kill you? We need protein too,’ they said. So, God responded and sent them quail to eat.

In fact, this was not even the first time they feared dying of thirst! Shortly after they set out from the Red Sea, they landed in a place called Marar. There they found water but it was undrinkable ...bitter is the term they used. Again, they complained and, why wouldn’t they?! I surely would have. It’s scary when you and your children are thirsty and there is not a bit of water to be found. But God again responded mercifully, instructing Moses to throw a stick in the bitter water. Moses did and the water became sweet or drinkable.

So, you see, this story is part of a long journey with numerous campsites and numerous times of building flimsy huts and numerous complaints as they faced one crises after another.

It’s this that’s remembered in the flimsy canopy we gathered under with my Rabbi friend on that beautiful Fall day. The sticks that formed

the legs of the canopy were held together by tired pieces of rope and a prayer. It wouldn't take much for it all to come tumbling down as we sat there, around a picnic table. It was intentionally flimsy to match the temporary huts the Hebrew people built as they moved from camp to camp. It's also a little like life itself. No matter how hard we try to secure a place that's well protected, sturdy, immovable, and safe there always seems to be something that threatens to shake it loose. Life is fragile, we discover again and again. Life doesn't stay still, certain, predictable, and reliable. Like it or not, we are very much like the Hebrew people, always on the move. Just when we think we've built ourselves an impervious little castle protected by moats flowing with 401ks, mutual funds, and IRAs, something happens. Just when we think we're in a safe place where the water is sweet, the food is reliable, the roof is permanent, and the world's hostility is far from our doorstep, life forces us to move on to its next stage, its next place, its next temporary home and, once again, we encounter new dangers that fill us with fear. We shouldn't be too hard on ourselves when we feel afraid. It's part of being human and it's a good reminder that we need reminders.

I have a lapel pin I sometimes wear that reads Zachor. It's the Hebrew word for 'Remember'. It helps me to remember how difficult it is to remember, especially in times of crisis. How difficult it is to remember how God was there in the past, even and especially in times of crisis. Of course, maybe it wasn't easy at the time. Maybe the moment demanded much from us. Maybe the resolution took way longer than we thought we'd be able to endure. But, somehow, water eventually came from a stone, the manna arrived, the river that seemed like a dead end opened with a dry path to walk upon, God's servant, our Moses, showed up at the door with a casserole dish, a kind word, a tear to be shared, a hand to hold, something to remind us that the promise is not forgotten, the water will turn sweet again and, sure enough, it did. We lived another day. We were refreshed and readied for the next leg of the journey.

One thing I have come to appreciate about many of the festivals our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate is the props they use to help them remember the story. The Sukkah we sat under, for example. The story

sounds different, bolder, more real there as this flimsy hut creaks and groans under a gentle breeze. Be careful, it warns, don't get too comfortable in any one spot. Life is not so reliable but God is. No matter what campsite you land in along the way, the water will come, the food will come, life will come.

Today, Christians around the world gather around another powerful reminder of God's permanence in our lives even as we struggle with life's impermanence. Some will be gathering at this table amid destroyed homes and communities ravaged by a string of recent hurricanes. Some will be gathering at this table in secret because it's dangerous to do so in the place where they live. Some will be gathering at this table in dire circumstances where even bread is a luxury and clean, drinkable water is increasingly hard to find. Some will be gathering at this table while gunshots ring just outside their windows. Some will be gathering at this extended table in hospital rooms or hospice facilities. Some will be gathering at this table with a sense of foreboding as they look to a future that seems bleak and threatening. Some will be gathering at this table filled with anger as they find themselves sitting across from the ideological other.

This is our traveling, flimsy hut, complete with a picnic table, reminding us that we're all in this together. We're all on our way even as this table reminds us that when God calls us from slavery to freedom that call is permanent. It's a call that comes with the promise that at no point will we be left on our own. At no point will we be deserted and left to die. At no point will the water not be made sweet so that we can drink and live. At no point will the table be left empty. Come, eat, everything is ready...the bread is baked, the juice is poured, the table is set. Come and taste what life will be like on God's Holy mountain where all tears will be finally dried. God is here and we, each one of us, will always be God's Beloved, yes, even when we're complaining because fear has gotten the best of us.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.