

## “Life’s a Bad Trip”

Ex. 17:1-7, John 4:4-42, Rom. 5:1-11  
Lent 3, Hope Church, Lynn Japinga, Feb. 24, 2008

Last Sunday Gordon preached about the journey as a model for the Christian life. It’s good to take risks and go some place new, and get out of our comfort zone. Life’s a trip, he said. And we’re all in process and learning and growing.

And that’s all true.

But sometimes, wouldn’t you rather stay home?

Because some trips are just bad.

You head off for a little time in the sun and you spend eight hours sitting on an airport runway. You are in the middle seat of the back row of the plane. The pretzels are gone and so is the water. There is a restless toddler next to you and a toilet overflowing behind you. Finally you arrive, but your luggage doesn’t. It rains all week. And then you drink the water and get Montezuma’s revenge.

That’s a bad trip.

Think about those poor Israelites wandering in the wilderness. The trip started off so well. God quite dramatically set them free from the oppressive Egyptians. God parted the waters of the Red Sea so the people could pass through, and then the Egyptian soldiers all drowned. But soon the drama ended and reality set in. They were hot and hungry and bored. They complained about the lack of food, and God provided manna, a kind of bread, in the wilderness.

Now they were thirsty. They had been wandering all day and their water jugs had long been empty. They were hot and tired and sweaty and they desperately needed some water. So they took it out on Moses. “Are you trying to kill us?”

The Israelites are usually portrayed as whiney, ungrateful wretches, and that's mostly true. They didn't seem to understand that God had provided for them in the past and likely would in the future.

But put yourself in their shoes. Most of us don't want to be in a car for two hours with our children. Imagine wandering in the wilderness all day with a toddler who needs to be carried and a teenager. Imagine the blisters. The sweat. And everybody around you has a headache from the dehydration and they get crankier with each mile. In the midst of all this misery, God seemed very far away. Yes, God had provided that bread from heaven, but who knew how long that would last. And who WAS this God anyway? Was God just a figment of Moses' imagination? Somebody Moses had dreamed up to justify an ego trip of his own?

This was a bad trip.

God could have become very angry with the Israelites. God was gracious in the face of their complaints. God understand what they needed. God knew they could not survive without water. So God told Moses how to get water out of a rock.

At the end of this story, there is an interpretive comment that explains the meaning of the names Massah and Meribah. The Israelites had tested God, asking whether the Lord was among them or not?

That is a powerful question, isn't it? The Israelites set off on this rather amazing journey, but they had some very real concerns about where they were going and whether there would be food and water. Was this trip God's idea? Was God present? Would God care for us? Is the Lord among us or not?

Most of us live fairly busy and complicated lives. We don't lack for food and water. We are not wandering in the wilderness. And yet we have our share of complaints. Some of them are pretty silly. We know that. But many of our complaints are rooted in a deep sense of fear or insecurity. We complain about our jobs, which demand too much or too little of us. We worry about our health. We worry about our financial security. We complain that the church or the family doesn't appreciate us. We complain that we are bored. And underlying those complaints and worries is a deeper question. Is God here? Does God care about me? Am I doing the right thing with my life? Is this all there is?

Sometimes life is a hard trip. Sometimes it is a difficult trip.

The Samaritan woman might have complained that her life was a bad trip also. She is often described as an immoral woman, sort of like a movie star today with serial marriages. But she probably did not have much choice. There was a custom that when a man died without having children, his brother or another relative was expected to marry the widow and bear children in the name of the first man. So it's possible that she had been married to several men and watched each of them die. Or she might have been repeatedly divorced, but since women rarely had the freedom to initiate divorce, the men would have mostly likely left *her*, possibly because she could not bear children. So she had been through five funerals or divorces, and the current man probably refused to marry her. Maybe he did not want to be dead husband number six.

Whatever the background, she was not a very popular woman. Trouble seemed to follow her but people avoided her. So she came to the well at noon, the hottest part of the day when no one else was likely to be there. But a strange man was sitting there. He was hot and tired and thirsty and he asked if she would draw him some water.

This was a very odd request. He was a Jew; she was a Samaritan. Jews did not share dishes with Samaritans. He was a man; she was a woman. Good Jewish men did not speak with women. They certainly don't engage in theological conversation. So she asked him why he would want a drink from her.

The two of them then had a long meandering conversation where one topic does not quite logically follow from the one before. He offers her living water, which she thinks might be a permanent supply of water delivered directly to her home. She doesn't realize he is speaking metaphorically. But she does have a sense that he is offering her something worthwhile. And she could use something worthwhile in her life.

But when she said yes, she would like the living water, Jesus told her to go call her husband. She said she had no husband. Jesus observed that she had had *five* husbands, and was not married to her current man. Preachers and Bible commentators have often described this as a confrontation or a judgment. They say Jesus is pointing out her sinfulness and chastising her for her immorality. But the text doesn't say that. He simply states as a fact that she has had five husbands. The point is not that he judges her, but that he *knows* her. He knows her past, he knows how painful life has been for her, and yet he is gracious and kind to her.

Perhaps you have had a friendship like that ... a person with whom you can be completely honest. You trust him or her with your dark side, your doubts, your grief, your failures. Your friend listens to all of your life without judging you. It is safe and comforting when someone knows the worst about you and still loves you.

Jesus honored the Samaritan woman by having a conversation with her. We don't fully understand how radical that was in his time when women were dismissed as incapable of learning or thinking about the Jewish faith. And her faith and theological

understanding grew in that conversation. And then she went out and told her community about Jesus, and they were drawn to him by her excitement.

In both of these stories, God or Jesus hears the pain and the neediness of people, and responds with grace. Not because they deserve it. But because God is gracious. And because God so often provides water from a rock or living water, just because God chooses to do so. God knows life can be a bad trip sometimes, and God provides grace along the way.

For us it isn't water from a rock. God invites us to SEE signs of grace in our lives. How does God provide for you? Perhaps through a surprising act of love from someone? Perhaps through a gracious, affirming conversation?

God also invites us to BE signs of grace. You can't provide water from a rock or living water. But you can provide fruit for the shelves of the Community Action House. You can help support the water mission project.

And you can be a sign of grace by trying to listen to what is behind the complaints that you hear. In the church, in your family, in your work place, what is making people unhappy? Usually it is something deeper. Often it is the question: does anybody care about me?

You can be a sign of grace by listening. Paying attention. Taking people as they are.

Life can be a bad trip sometimes. But God knows us, and God is gracious, and we can be gracious to each other. Amen.