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## **“A Drought of Faith”**

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

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**Exodus 17: 1-17; John 4: 5– 29, 39-42**

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Thirst can take either of two forms:

it can be a bodily need of drink,

or it can be an ardent desire or craving for anything.

For the Israelites, it previously had been that ardent desire or craving:

for respect and human dignity as a people;

for freedom to worship their God;

for release from bondage and escape from certain genocide;

for deliverance from a land flowing with dry sand and straw,

to a land flowing with milk and honey.

But now, in today's passage, a bodily need of drink

on the road from slavery to covenant

causes the Israelites to doubt Moses and to doubt God.

Theirs is a double crisis, really.

“Give us water to drink,” they dry-mouth to Moses.

But what their cracked lips fail to form

is the true and ardent desire of their parched hearts:

“Give us God.”

The Israelites are in the Desert of Sin, huddled tightly in tents,

like the Duke crazies, but there is no water, water anywhere.

Not only is there no water to green their grass,

no water to wash their cars, no water to flush their toilets,  
no water to fill their bathtubs, no water to wash their dishes,  
no water to wash their clothes.

There is no water....for the people to drink.

And while we in the Triangle might identify somewhat  
with their state of liquid deprivation,

we have come nowhere near the extreme condition  
of acute risk and jeopardy

that the Israelites now face with complete separation  
from life-giving resources, like bread, meat, and now water.

They are physically and emotionally parched, sun-baked, scorched, seared,  
dehydrated, shriveled, and burnt to a crisp.

Their hope, their dream deferred, is as dry as Langston Hughes' raisin in the sun.

And their cracked lips cry out, "Give us water to drink."

But their parched hearts cry out even louder, "Give us God."

Their presenting crisis is a water shortage;  
their internal crisis is a drought of faith.  
Do you know that feeling?

An interesting exchange took place last week  
at one of my favorite local oases, *Mad Hatters'*,  
over a cup of coffee.

When inquiring the whereabouts of some absentee church members,  
formerly active in the church,

baptized their children in the church,

but now who have been conspicuously AWOL for quite some time,

I was told matter of factly, "Oh, they have given up on God.

It's just too difficult for them to believe in God anymore,  
with all the bad things going on in the world."

This is not the answer I usually get when I ask such a question.

I usually hear that someone has been too busy lately,  
that someone has gone back to school,

that someone has been sick, that someone is having a crisis at home,

even that someone is mad at one of the pastors.  
But rarely have heard those despairing words,  
    "Oh, they have given up on God."  
  
I was shocked by such an extreme reaction,  
    but I can certainly understand how someone  
    might come to that conclusion.  
  
Did you happen to read the profiles of the victims of last week's  
    campus shooting at Northern Illinois University?  
Heartbreaking, really - five innocent young adults, who now are no more:  
Daniel, 20, a former high school football player, had just called home  
    at noon to wish his mother a happy Valentine's day;  
Catalina, 20, from Cicero, Illinois (Phyllis' hometown) was studying  
    to be a teacher. Coming from an Hispanic family,  
    she was going to school because she wanted to become  
    *somebody* in life;  
Ryanne, 19, an only child, had just updated her MySpace page  
    to say, "Happy Valentine's Day Everybody!";  
Julianna, 32, had served in the Army Corps of Engineers  
    in Bosnia for 12 years building schools,  
    and her family had worried about her being overseas.  
    But they never thought to worry about her being back in a classroom.  
Gayle, 20, with a strong faith background in the Church of Christ,  
    had worked as a summer counselor at a church camp.  
Her tight-knit community knew that something was wrong  
    when she failed to call home after the shooting.  
  
When I hear particulars about the real lives of these sweet people cut short,  
    I can understand how someone sensitive to the pain in the world,  
    overwhelmed by pathos,  
    might experience a "Meribah moment"  
    and as a result cave in to the words of resignation,  
    "I'm giving up on God".

As a matter of fact, a recent spate of literature,  
coming out of the secular culture of the United Kingdom,  
is advocating just that –  
a complete denial of the existence of God.

Richard Dawkins, Oxford University Professor  
of the Public Understanding of Science, for one,  
has penned a book called *The God Delusion*, his intent being  
to raise consciousness that to be an atheist  
is a “brave and splendid” aspiration.

Belief in God is not only a delusion, he argues, but a ‘pernicious’ one.  
On a scale of 1-7, where 1 is certitude that God exists and 7 is certitude  
that God does not exist, Dawkins qualifies himself as a 6.

“I cannot know for certain, but I think God is very improbable,  
and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there,” he says.

Dawkins’ goal is to show that people can live happy and meaningful lives  
without worshipping a deity,  
and that religion, far from being a necessary prop for morality,  
actually produces more evil than good.

(Jim Holt. *Beyond Belief*. New York Times, October 22, 2006)

Then there is Christopher Hitchens’ book, *God is Not Great:  
How Religion Poisons Everything*, a vehement response  
to the growing influence of evangelicals in American politics,  
and the detrimental fall-out of fundamentalism  
around the world.

(Michael Kinsley. *In God, Distrust*. New York Times. May 13, 2007)

And also, John Allen Paulos’ book, *Irreligion: A Mathematician Explains  
Why the Arguments for God Just Don’t Add Up*,  
where Paulos tries to use easy-to-follow mathematical premises to  
refute and dismantle historical rationales for God-belief,  
from creationism, to first cause arguments;  
from God’s omnipotence,  
to ontological arguments for the existence of God.

(Michiko Kakutani. *Primer Roller, Prepare to Meet a Wiseacre*. New York Times,

January 22, 2008)

All this being said is to make the point that an entire nation,  
The United Kingdom, is in a state of extreme faith drought,  
in a Meribah crisis of unprecedented proportion,  
where the only way they can seem to quench their thirst  
for meaning in times of uncertainty and tragedy is to say,  
"We've given up on God."

And I would hate to see us head in that same direction,  
to flounder in that same wilderness,  
to dry up and die from that same acquiescence to  
this new atheism.

Like the Israelites, I would want to ask,  
"Why did you bring us up out of the Old World, seeking religious freedom,  
to make us and our children and our livestock  
die...from an inability to make the leap of faith  
necessary to quench our thirst for ultimate meaning and purpose?"

What would lead us to succumb  
to the rash words of mumbling mouths, "We've given up on God,"  
instead of heading the insistent meditations of  
parched hearts bleating, "Give us God"?

Still, I know well the temptation to accede to droughts of faith.

I had my own little Meribah moment this past week;  
my own little dilemma of doubt.

A youth I formerly mentored through the confirmation process,  
a 23 year old honor student, Eagle Scout, and Marine Corporal,  
died as a result of emotional injuries suffered during  
his tour of duty in Iraq.

He was not physically injured in the war; he had no purple heart.

He died as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder  
from what he had seen in Iraq,  
from what he had experienced in Iraq,  
from what he had been forced to endure in Iraq.

He died from a purpled soul.

He was the second son in his family to die from the war.  
And I, too, feel that thirst for ultimate meaning.

An unnamed woman breaks a public boundary,  
and comes to the local watering hole at noon, thirsty.

We don't know what drove her there.

Perhaps she is washed up after five sequential marriages.

Perhaps she is tired, having nursed husbands faithfully  
through long periods of illness,

only to have them die on her, again and again.

Perhaps she is childless and destitute, even after many marriages.

Or perhaps she is the mother of many, too many,

more than she can handle, alone, with no husband to share the burden.

And so she commits an act of civil disobedience

and comes to the well at noon, thirsty, looking to quench

her ardent craving and desire for meaning.

Is the God of Jacob a delusion?

Is the God of spirit and truth really great, or just great poison to everything else?

Is all of our previous religious instruction just bunk, adding up to nothing  
in the face of real crisis?

And then she meets this foreign man, a Jew,

who happens to arrive at the well, coincidentally, at the same moment,

equally out of socially-acceptable bounds,

tired from his journey, thirsty, and bucketless.

They shouldn't talk to one another, but they do.

He mumbles through swollen lips, "Give me water".

She mumbles in her parched heart, "Give me God".

He looks deep into her eyes, sees the truth about her life,

understands her pain, and offers not judgment,

but living water that spring up from within

and offers wells of abundant life eternal and meaning.

She looks him straight back in the eyes, sees that he is a prophet,  
or perhaps more, understands that he is open to her deepest questions  
without being judgmental,  
and she grows in faith as a result of their exchange.

Do either of them ever actually drink?

Yes – but not water.

He arrives thirsty from his journey and bucketless.

She leaves bucketless to journey back to town,  
thirsty to tell others what she has experienced.

Both experience a profound learning.

In the wilderness of life,

where no life-sustaining resources visibly appear,

God provides with inscrutable generosity

something even greater than desperate human need;  
someONE even greater than desperate human need.

God provides Jesus,

God's love and generosity made flesh for a thirsty world;

the embodiment of John 3:16, divine world-love

made human, not to condemn, but to save

and to offer springs welling up to eternal life;

God's open hospitality reaching across socially-unacceptable boundaries;

God's solution to human desire to be seen and known

and understood for who we really are deep down inside;

God's fathomless well to those thirsty, in the face of crisis, for meaning.

Of course, we could shrug it all off and say, "Well, we've given up on God".

Or, we could come to the well and come to the font thirsty,

with hearts and minds like empty buckets and the simple question,

"Where do I get this living water?"

And just maybe, at the well of our despair,

we'll meet the Messiah of our deepest thirst. Amen.