

Moses' staff was quite a piece of wood. In Egypt, he turned it into a snake. When Egyptian magicians did the same with their staffs, Moses' snake ate their snakes. Moses later struck the Nile with it and turned it to blood. He stretched out his hand with it and brought forth the plagues. At the Sea of Reeds, Moses' held it aloft, the waters parted, and Israel walked on dry ground. Once on the other side, he raised the staff again, and the water covered the Egyptians. Now, Israel is thirsty, and Moses' staff once again is put to work. He strikes a rock, and water flows out.

Whatever became of this holy relic, you may ask? According to the SyFy Channel show, *LegendQuest*, it fell into the hands of the Nabateans; Israel's neighbors in what is now Jordan. We know them best for the city of Petra. The host, a fit looking archaeologist with a wonderful accent, through many entertaining and well-videoed leaps of logic brought us to a false wall in a Nabatean temple atop what may have been Horeb, the mountain of God. Was the staff of Moses hidden behind that wall? If so, folks in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul will be very upset, because they think they have it on display, as does a museum in Egypt. Meanwhile, Jewish tradition teaches that the Staff of Moses, like the Ark of the Covenant, was lost when Solomon's Temple was destroyed.

Holy relics like the Staff of Moses continue to fascinate us. They hold out the tantalizing prospect of wielding the power of God to suit ourselves. Whenever we face some obstacle or feel some need, all we have to do is hold up the staff, and we're good to go. We have the power. We don't have to ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" We know. We have the staff. All we have to do is "strike the rock."

If only life were that simple....

✧ "Is the Lord among us or not?"

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I wonder if Moses could take his staff to Wall Street or Washington. I wonder if he could use it to break through some of the "stuck-ness" and stagnation we are experiencing economically and politically.

We don't have to watch our favorite news media for long before we hear the grumbling. Conversations at the water cooler, the local watering hole, and yes, even in the church often express our dissatisfaction and our fear. We're thirsty; thirsty for hope; thirsty for a sense that we're getting somewhere; thirsty for a sense of security. We're thirsty, and we complain because there's no water in sight. We're in a dry and barren land that seems to be getting drier and barren by the day.

We're in touch with our inner Israelite. We're responding to our need in our wilderness the same way those ancient Israelites did: We have a problem. We don't see the solution, and somebody's going to hear about it!

Exodus invites us to take our dissatisfaction to a deeper level. Instead of taking it out on one another, take it to God: “Is the Lord among us or not?” When everything's coming up roses, we're sure God is with us. We practice a circumstantial, utilitarian faith; if things are working well – God is with us! If not – “Is the Lord among us or not?”

My fellow Israelites, grumblers, complainers, dispensers of the fine whine, hear the good news of Exodus: God is with us; on the good days and on the not-so-good, even downright awful days. God is close enough to hear what we grumble under our breath. God is paying attention to our sighs and our groans; the body language of our despair.

God is with us, and God does not condemn us. We could certainly understand if God said to Moses, “I've had enough of these complainers! They want to go back to Egypt? Fine! Raise your staff and I'll give them a whitewater express trip!”

Moses is on board with that. He's had enough of the complaining, but God is patient and merciful and kind. God does not treat us as our sins deserve. God answers our complaining as if it were the most pious prayer. God gives us what we need as if we were devoted disciples par excellence!

Take your dissatisfaction to a deeper level: “Is the Lord among us or not?” Good times come; good times go; bad times come; bad times go, but the Lord is with us always. Drink deep from that well, and strike the rock.

✦ “Strike the Rock!”

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Moses had nothing to do with the appearance of the manna. His staff was just a walking stick. He didn't raise it up. He didn't say, “Let my people eat,” like Charlton Heston. He simply said, “Tomorrow you will eat,” and when the manna appeared, he said, “What is it? It's the bread you've been longing for.”

So why is there so much more pomp and circumstance involved in quenching the people's thirst? For the first time, leadership in Israel moves beyond Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The elders of Israel follow Moses in a parade in front of all the people. Moses goes up on Horeb to a big rock. God is there, perhaps as a pillar of cloud. Moses strikes the rock. Water erupts from it. The people drink and are satisfied – for now.

Why do we have to go through all these steps? Can't Moses simply say, “Let my people drink?”

One drink isn't enough. We'll be thirsty again tomorrow, and the Lord knows we have short memories. “Lord, what have you done for me lately?”

Rituals remind us of what God has done. We pour water in the baptismal font, and we remember how God delivered us from the power of sin. We break bread and drink the cup, and we remember that God loves us so much that he gave his only Son so that we could be saved. Our Rock allowed the Rock of Ages to be struck, to be pierced by a spear, and from his side, blood and living water flowed.

One drink isn't enough. We thirst every day. Strike the rock! Drink deep. Start your day with the Lord's Prayer. End it with a “thank you.” Develop your own daily practice that will help you remember what God has done. Strike the rock, and drink deep!

Here's a prayer I came across in my devotions that helps me “Strike the Rock”: It's from the Sarum Primer:

God be in my head, and in my understanding;  
God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;

God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;  
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;  
God be at mine end, and at my departing.

*Sarum Primer, 1558*

Take your dissatisfaction to a deeper level: “Is the Lord among us or not?”  
Good times come; good times go; bad times come; bad times go, but the  
Lord is with us always. Drink deep; strike the rock. Amen.