

God's Sustaining Presence

September 28 • 2008

Focus Scripture

Exodus 17:1–7

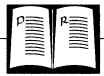
Additional Scriptures

Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16

Philippians 2:1–13

Matthew 21:23–32

Incline your ear and hear us, O God. Our spirits thirst and seek renewal in your love and forgiveness. You, O God, are the One we trust for life. Stir up your power and come among us. Restore us to live in the hope of your Christ. Amen.



Replacement biblical background page for **Lutheran, Episcopal, and Anglican** congregations using the **paired reading** stream of the Revised Common Lectionary is on the Congregational Life Paired Reading CD.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access *Spirit Sightings* for connections between current events and the focus passage.

As the Israelites learn to live as a community of God's people, they encounter frustration and anger, and then hope, as God's compassion comes in a surprising way. God's people today still encounter God's grace in unexpected places and persons. Taken together, these texts challenge us to discern God's abundant provision and our response.

Focus Scripture: Exodus 17:1–7

The people of Israel are still wandering in the wilderness, led by Moses and Aaron. In the story last week, the hungry community called out for food, and God fed them day-by-day with bread from heaven. Today's focus scripture begins as the Hebrews set up camp at Rephidim, and discover there is no water. Their reaction to this dilemma is a familiar one – they lash out at Moses. How could they be sure that God was still with them? In spite of their deliverance from Egypt, their reliance on God's sustaining presence falters once again. The people accuse Moses of intending to kill them all along.

Moses, in turn, cries out to God for guidance. "What shall I do with this people?"

Moses and the Hebrew people are not left alone in this wilderness of frustration and anger. God responds with grace and the journey resumes: "Go on ahead of the people...I will be standing there in front of you." God's faithful presence and provision sustains them once again. God's faithfulness prevails over the Hebrews' lack of trust and faith.

Moses strikes the rock as God directs, and water rushes forth. The springs that are created there are named Massah and Meribah, Hebrew words that recall the Israelites' quarrelling and testing. This may seem like a reminder to not raise complaints to God. Or, perhaps, the names are more a judgment of their lack of trust in God's willingness or ability to hear and to act.

The text concludes with the question: "Is God among us or not?" This question remains critical for all who journey in faith. So does the response given in this text – water springs from a rock to bring life in the wilderness. This will not be the last time that

the people of Israel grow anxious and fearful on their journey to the Promised Land. Still, as is often the case for them, this time of crisis pushes them to re-affirm their trust in God's presence.

Trust that God is among us is evident in **Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16**. God's provision of good things is celebrated with joy. The lectionary skips over 78:5–11, the memory of the people's rebellion against God and their refusal to keep covenant. As a remedy against this happening again, the psalmist calls the people to remember and recite accounts of God's powerful works.

Paul, in **Philippians 2:1–13**, declares, "God is with us!" And to live in God's name is to be of service to all. When Paul implores the community to "work out your own salvation" (v. 12), he is not saying salvation is earned, but that the community must take the steps necessary to reach and express their complete wholeness. God calls; humans respond.

In Philippi, some favoured Caesar and some Jesus as their lord. In **Matthew 21:23–32**, Jesus faces religious authorities who refuse to take a stand either way. Jesus responds to this time of testing by declaring the importance of standing with God's truth, regardless of the consequences.

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As we live between frustration and hope, we call out to God and to our human leaders. We long to know we will be heard, that there will be a response. Assured by Christ, we can be confident of God's sustaining presence. What does it mean to trust in God alone in the midst of test and struggle? How might you and your church support one another as you grow in trust of God's compassion and provision?

