

## Welcome

[**Mother Teresa**] If you make a list of people close to God, Mother Teresa of Calcutta has to be close to the top of the list. An Albanian nun, Mother Teresa became an international symbol of Christian charity because she devoted her whole life to working in the worst slums of Calcutta, India, caring for those no one else in the world cared for. Mother Teresa is held up even by people of no faith as a saint, someone especially good. Christians see her as someone to be imitated, a high bar few of us will ever attain. If there is anyone who is close to God, it is Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Which is why, when her memoirs were published after her death, the world was shocked to learn that Mother Teresa didn't feel close to God. In her letters and journals, we find long stretches - years and decades - where Mother Teresa didn't feel God at all. In one letter to a spiritual mentor, she wrote:

[**Put her pic on a slide with this quote**] I am longing—with a painful longing to be all for God—to be holy in such a way that Jesus can live His life to the full in me. The more I want Him—the less I am wanted.—I want to love Him as He has not been loved—and yet there is that separation—that terrible emptiness, that feeling of absence of God. -- Mother Teresa

Can you imagine? Mother Teresa, that giant of a saint, confessing she feels a deep absence where she once felt God? Mother Teresa, describing her longing almost as an unquenchable thirst, the oasis of God's presence always just over the horizon.

After the shock of her words wore off, many have found comfort in Mother Teresa's honest confession. Because most of us know exactly what she's describing. Most of us have felt God's absence acutely. We've experienced times where we felt like we were wandering in a desert, where we reached out for some sort of comfort and felt... nothing. A void. An absence. A lack of God's presence.

Today we're going to talk about those wilderness times, those times we're thirsty for comfort, for relief and we wonder, Where is God? We'll see that there's a faith that runs deeper than feelings, a faith centered not on whether we can sense God's presence or not, but a faith that grows out of confidence in God's character and commitment to God's call. We'll see that true saints are the people who persevere regardless of how we feel.

So as we sing this morning, reflect on some of your own wilderness times. Where are those places in your life you've wondered if God is present or not. How did you feel in those times? How did you act?

## Talk

We're in the season of Lent, which prepares us to celebrate Jesus' resurrection at Easter. Lent is a season for confession of Sin and repentance. We look at ourselves and face how we have chosen not to follow God.

This year, our series is called Lent is for Losers. We're walking through the story of God's people, confronting again and again how they refused God's call on them. In their rejection of God, we find reflections of our own sins. They are failures, we are failures.

But this is exactly who Lent is for: the failures, the disappointments, the losers. Only when we are honest about our need for someone to rescue us can we see the God who has entered into our story, the God who takes our failure on himself, the God who becomes a loser all us losers. Lent is a season that ends at the Cross, when God gives up, surrenders to the ultimate loss, Death, for us.

[Map graphic Week 3] We began in the Garden, with the first man and woman, who refused to believe God really has our best interests at heart. Rather than trust, we responded with doubt and introduced sin into the world.

Last week, we met Abram, whom God called to leave everything he knew and follow to parts unknown. We saw that God's call is for everyone - there are no qualifications or credentials that make you good enough for God. God's call is not about where you've been, it's about where you're going.

[Scripture Slide 1] Today, we're going to the next step in the story. Turn with me in your Bibles to Exodus 17. After four generations, Abrams family had moved to Egypt, and a few generations after *that*, a new regime had enslaved them. For hundreds of years, God's people languished in slavery, wondering if God was going to keep the promises made to Abram.

God does keep those promises in the form of Moses, who frees Israel from the Pharaoh. In a dramatic showdown, God unleashes plague after plague on Egypt until Pharaoh finally relents and lets the people leave. But changing his mind yet again, Pharaoh gives chase, intent on returning the people to slavery. God miraculously parts the Red Sea and the Hebrews cross, while Pharaoh's armies are swallowed by the sea. Pharaoh is defeated and the people are safe and sound on the other side.

For the next several weeks, they camp at an oasis in the desert, until they run out of the food stores they brought with them from Egypt. They know they are headed to Mt. Sinai, where God is going to formalize their relationship, transform a ragtag group of runaway slaves into a people with an identity and a God. They know after that, God is leading them to a land, to a permanent home.

But first, this reprieve at the oasis. Once they run out of food, they set off into the desert, which is where our story picks up. Let's read what happens when they stop in a region with no water:

At the Lord's command, the whole community of Israel left the wilderness of Sin and moved from place to place. Eventually they camped at Rephidim, but there was no water there for the people to drink. So once more the people complained against Moses. "Give us water to drink!" they demanded.

“Quiet!” Moses replied. “Why are you complaining against me? And why are you testing the Lord?”

But tormented by thirst, they continued to argue with Moses. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Are you trying to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?”

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, “What should I do with these people? They are ready to stone me!”

The Lord said to Moses, “Walk out in front of the people. Take your staff, the one you used when you struck the water of the Nile, and call some of the elders of Israel to join you. I will stand before you on the rock at Mount Sinai. Strike the rock, and water will come gushing out. Then the people will be able to drink.” So Moses struck the rock as he was told, and water gushed out as the elders looked on.

Moses named the place Massah (which means “test”) and Meribah (which means “arguing”) because the people of Israel argued with Moses and tested the Lord by saying, “Is the Lord here with us or not?” -- Exodus 17:1-7

This place becomes known as Massah and Meribah because Israel tests God. We'll circle back to exactly what that means, but first, I want to note that God isn't frustrated with the people. Moses is frustrated, but God responds with grace and provision. To be clear, this is not the last time the people complain in the desert, and God does eventually get frustrated. But God is much slower to anger than we are. God overflows with patience and mercy for this newly-free people.

[**People complaining/forgetting in desert**] But the fact of God's patience only confirms that the people *are* testing God. This lack of faith on their part is a failure, a sin. How quickly they forgot all God had done for them, freeing them from Egypt. They question God's motives - has God brought them to the desert to kill them all, to make a laughing stock?

Before we are too hard on the people, might we pause and recognize ourselves in the people. How often do we assume when things are good that God is with us? And how many bad days does it take before we start to question God's presence in our lives? How long before we start to ask, "Why is God doing this? What did I do to deserve this? Does God even love me?"

Like Israel, we mistake easy roads and an abundance of water for God's presence. We assume if God is with us, we won't have any curves, bumps or bruises. Faith ends up being about feelings. We *feel* God is with us because we *feel* good. And when we don't *feel* good, well. God must not be with us.

How quickly, like Israel, we forget God's faithful presence in our lives. They forgot that they had been slaves in Egypt, helpless until God freed them. So too we forget what it's like to be powerless to sin.

They forgot that when Pharaoh threatened to overwhelm them, God parted the Red Sea and led them to freedom. So too, we forget that when we were helplessly trapped in Sin, God opened the waters of baptism that we might be welcomed into the freedom of the Church.

Israel forgot God's daily provision in the form of manna, bread from heaven. So too, we forget that Jesus is our daily bread, a constant source of provision and grace in the good and the difficult times of our lives.

When we hit hard times, we so quickly forget that God has been faithful in the past. We forget that God is trustworthy in the future. We allow feelings to dictate our faith.

We fail to see that God is *with us* in the wilderness. God does not stay distant in Heaven, removed and aloof. God walks the desert with us. God enters places of shame, failure and loss with us. God thirsts with us.

And God *calls* us. God calls us to inhabit that first vocation: to love each other well, to care for creation, to live as God's faithful representations in the world. God calls us to be part of the healing of the world. God calls us to be thirst-quenchers.

Our church is thirsty right now. We've had ups and downs over the last year - times that have been hard for many of us as individuals and for all of us as a community. I have to tell you, I get anxious. I worry about myself: am I a good enough leader to take us where we're going? I know I'm not as compassionate and pastoral as other people. I worry that I never work hard enough. There's always someone else to connect with, another person to counsel, another meeting. I get thirsty, too.

In these last months, I have had to remember again and again not to live by my feelings, but by God's promise of faithfulness. As a church, we have taken solace in the truth that God has been with us every step of the way. God knows our pain. God thirsts with us.

And that's good news because God's calling is still before us. We believe the next right step for our church is to create spaces where everyone can embrace their God-given callings. Welcoming *everyone* is challenging, especially when they don't look like me or think like me or believe the same things I do.

Some of us have gotten caught up worrying about everyone else's callings so we've forgotten to listen for ours.

Others of us know exactly what God is calling us to next, but we're afraid. We look back to Egypt and long for the days when things were comfortable and predictable - even if it meant we were slaves.

[Map Week 3: God with us in wilderness] So to all of us, let me remind you that God is with us. The same God who called Abram and Moses is the God who called Catalyst into being. The same God who freed Israel and sustained them in the wilderness is the God who called you and me to Catalyst.

This God is faithful. This God journeys through the wilderness with us and this will deliver us faithfully to the promised land. Let us take our thirst not as a question of God's goodness, but an invitation to a deeper trust.

### **Communion**

Nowhere is God's faithfulness more evident than on the Cross. So we approach his communion table today, and we come thirsty. This table takes us to the table Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. There he broke bread as his body, broken for us. His sacrifice, our daily bread. He passed us a cup of wine as his blood, poured out as a new covenant between us and God. His love, an eternal spring that quenches our thirst forever.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion. If you're willing to trust God with your thirst, and if you're willing to respond to God's invitation, you're welcome to the table today.

This morning, I want to lead you in a prayer of Examen. I'm going to ask you to reflect honestly on where you have refused to trust God's way, and to consider the next six weeks of Lent.

After that, we're going to do a corporate confession of sin. The words will be on the screen for you. I know reading together, out loud, can make some of you uncomfortable. You don't have to participate, but I want to challenge you to. The Lenten journey toward the cross cannot begin until we confess we are sinners. We can't be saved until we admit we need to be rescued.

[Communion Slide] The confession then leads us into a time of communion. We approach the table as losers, failures, sinners. We need Jesus' faithfulness on the cross like we need food and drink. So we come to receive bread he gives us as his body, broken for us. He gives us wine as his blood, spilled for a new covenant.

We come to the table as sinners. We receive grace and mercy. And we leave walking in God's way, as God's faithful image-bearers, to return to our vocation of caring for the world and for each other.

1. When in the last week was I faithful to God's way?
2. When did I let my feelings dictate my faith?
3. When in the next week might feelings dictate my faith?

4. How can I choose this week to be faithful no matter how I'm feeling?

**Confession:**

Leader: Too often, we mistake feeling for faith. We have not trusted you to be faithful as you have always been faithful.

**People: Lord, help our unbelief.**

Leader: We have ignored your voice, calling us to the responsibility of living in your freedom.

**People: Lord, open our ears.**

Leader: We have stained our souls by our action and inaction.

**People: Cleanse us, Lord.**

Leader: We are broken by disease, bruised by the sins of others, weakened and unable to repair ourselves.

**People: Heal us, Lord.**

Leader: We ignore your call to center our lives in you, and so are deaf to the hopes and cries of the poor, the sick, the needy, and the earth.

**People: Ground us, Lord!**

Leader: When we confess our sinful ways, God abundantly pardons. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

**People: In the name of Jesus Christ, we are all forgiven**

*Prayer*

**Blessing**

Faithfulness is how Mother Teresa responded to God's absence. Faithfulness is why we call her a saint today. In another letter, she reflected on Jesus' words on the cross. In John 19:

Jesus knew that his mission was now finished, and to fulfill Scripture he said, "I am thirsty." --  
John 19:28

Here again, God thirsts. The fountain of living water seems to have run dry. Here, Mother Teresa found a God who knew her pain, the ache of loneliness and isolation. So she wrote this:

**[Mother Teresa with quote]** Please pray for me, that it may please God to lift this darkness from my soul for only a few days. For sometimes the agony of desolation is so great and at the same time the longing for the Absent One so deep, that the only prayer which I can still say is— Sacred Heart of Jesus I trust in Thee—I will satiate Thy thirst for souls. -- Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa saw God's thirst as an invitation to faithfulness, an opportunity to join in God's work of rescuing the world. Through her darkest times, she clung to this vision of God, entering into our pain and misery and she knew what she was to do.

Friends, God has given you a calling. God has given *us* a calling. It's easy to let fear, anxiety, uncertainty keep us from moving forward. It's easy to let hard times convince us God is not with us, that God has abandoned us. But in this season of Lent, let's not test God. Let's trust that the God who created us and called us is still with us, walking this wilderness with us. Let us trust that God is thirsty, too.

And like Mother Teresa, let us commit, even in the dark places, to answer God's call. Let us commit together to quench God's thirst for souls.