

Cracking Rocks

Church of the Servant
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Text: Exodus 17:1-7 Water from the rock

There's a story about Michelangelo when he was a young sculptor. He was dragging a stained uneven chunk of rock to his workshop. It was a hard job and a neighbor watched him struggling to move the ungraceful ugly stone. "Michelangelo, why are wasting your time on that beaten up, cracked stone?" The young man paused, looking up. "You might not be able to see it, neighbor, but there's a beautiful angel inside this stone-- and I'm going to help him to get out."

There's often something beautiful, something amazing, hiding behind unattractive exteriors. We've all had that experience. We met someone who didn't appeal to us at all at first—and they turned out to be a precious friend. Or we were in a situation that seemed blank and hopeless and it ended up that we received some great blessing because of it. It's the central image of our Christian faith, after all. A man is tortured and buried, sealed in a tomb—the very symbol of death—but we know that hidden in that blank stone tomb is an incredible force of life.

It's easy to see how the Israelites, the escaped slaves, must have felt. They had barely found their freedom and now they were in a desert. They were desperately thirsty with little knowledge of where they were or how to survive. They called out to Moses and God, and Moses led them to a rock. A big, bare, unattractive, dry rock. How could they know that it had acted as a cistern and held deep, cool water? Moses struck it at the right point and out flowed liquid life.

We're all thirsty. For real liquids, of course, but for more. In our individual lives perhaps we thirst most for God's wonderful love. We yearn to feel that unconditional love wash over us. And in our group life, our society's life, we thirst most for justice. We yearn to form a social order that expresses freedom and justice for all. Remember the cry of the prophet Amos, "God says, 'Let justice roll down like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'"

Several of us from the congregation are taking the six-week course "Wilmington in Black and White." We're learning about race relations from the time of reconstruction to today. It's not all about Wilmington; Wilmington is an example of what was happening all over the south, and sometime in the north as well. The event which stands out most is the Riot or Massacre of 1898. Some wealthy white citizens wanted to take power so they stirred up racial tensions and fear. They marched into town intimidating black residents, driving them to hide in their homes or the woods. They shot people in the streets. They went into government offices and sent the office holders away, taking over. We don't know exactly how many people were hurt or killed. Some reports said nine were killed, some said 50, some, 300. No matter what the numbers it was an *awful* event. It was a terrible, shameful moment in our history. It's hard to look at it.

Tim Tyson, who is teaching the course, has encouraged us to look beyond the ugliness of that event, however. He suggests that beyond the dead rock face in this case, there is hope. Wilmington was chosen for the riot because of its very success in race relations. Just after reconstruction blacks and whites were living together successfully here. We had a high black literacy rate, perhaps higher than the white rate. We had many black-owned businesses: seafood sellers, restaurateurs, skilled craftsmen, an architect. Four out of the ten city aldermen were black. Now Tim warned us that this

didn't mean that all was perfect and everyone was idealistically happy about diversity. No. But people of different races were cooperating to manage the city in a way that served all people. They were making a mighty effort at toleration and sharing of power. This is perhaps why the riot took place—because this success scared those who wanted to keep power in a few hands. Behind the horror of the event was this work of hope, this toleration and cooperation. And if people in the 1890's could have the will to build a just and cooperative society, that can encourage us who live in a later time, a time when civil rights and the value of diversity are more honored.

Sometimes in our individual lives, or in our group life, we come upon a blank rock face. We guess there may be life behind it, but we don't know how to get through. It looks dry and dead and ugly. What is it that allows us access to the living water? What is it that opens the crack into the rock's precious center? When we look at the Israelites we have an answer. It is the very force of their yearning that calls forth God's might. They long for freedom; they pray; they cry out to God. Moses is raised up and they begin their escape. They get to that rock and they are desperate for water. They call out to God and to Moses. They complain, they beg, they plead. They stand behind Moses and that staff with a focused longing full of power. And Moses finds the crack and he strikes it and the water flows.

A wonderful singer, Mary Williams, is assisting in the course on racial history. When we get a little tired or overwhelmed her voice—a *big* voice—leads the group in a spiritual or gospel song. This week she sang one that said, "My brother may turn back but I'm going on. My mother may turn back but *I'm* going on. My father may turn back but *I'M* going on, on to freedom land." Each of us needs to get the vision of God's justice and hold on to it, carry it on, take it forward. And we as a church can have the power that only a focused people can have. *We* are not going to be turned back in our yearning for love and justice. It is together that we channel God's power. We join the prophet in saying, "Let justice roll down like a river, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."