

Third Sunday in Lent

Follow the Leader?

Exodus 17:1-7

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Analysis by Peter Keyel

1From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" 3But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" 4So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

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Nicolas Poussin, Moses schlägt Wasser aus dem Felsen, (Moses striking Water from the Rock), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Instead of condemning us for our sins, God will enter the world as Jesus and bear those sins, even as he bears Moses' lack of faith and blame. God's affirmation of this new strategy is revealed when Jesus dies to sin, and yet is raised from the dead.

DIAGNOSIS: Leaders Are Powerless

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Leading is Hard

Moses has a problem. He's led the people out of the wilderness, but there is no water for them to drink. He took a risk, and the people he is leading may pay for that mistake with their lives.

Their reasonable request—water—is met not with Moses’ faith, but his indignation that they are challenging his leadership. The indignation does nothing to solve the problem; there is no water.

While most of us have not led thousands of people and attendant livestock through a desert, the leadership challenges still may be familiar. And if, as leaders, we’ve made expensive mistakes, we know that valid criticism stings all the more.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Afraid

Moses’ speed in invoking a higher authority, hints that he is afraid. The people ask for water, and Moses deflects his mistake by claiming they are “testing the Lord.” Instead of reassuring the people that water will come, or taking responsibility for his leadership, he reframes their request as an affront against God. When the people do not buy it, Moses fears not just his public mistake, but also for his life.

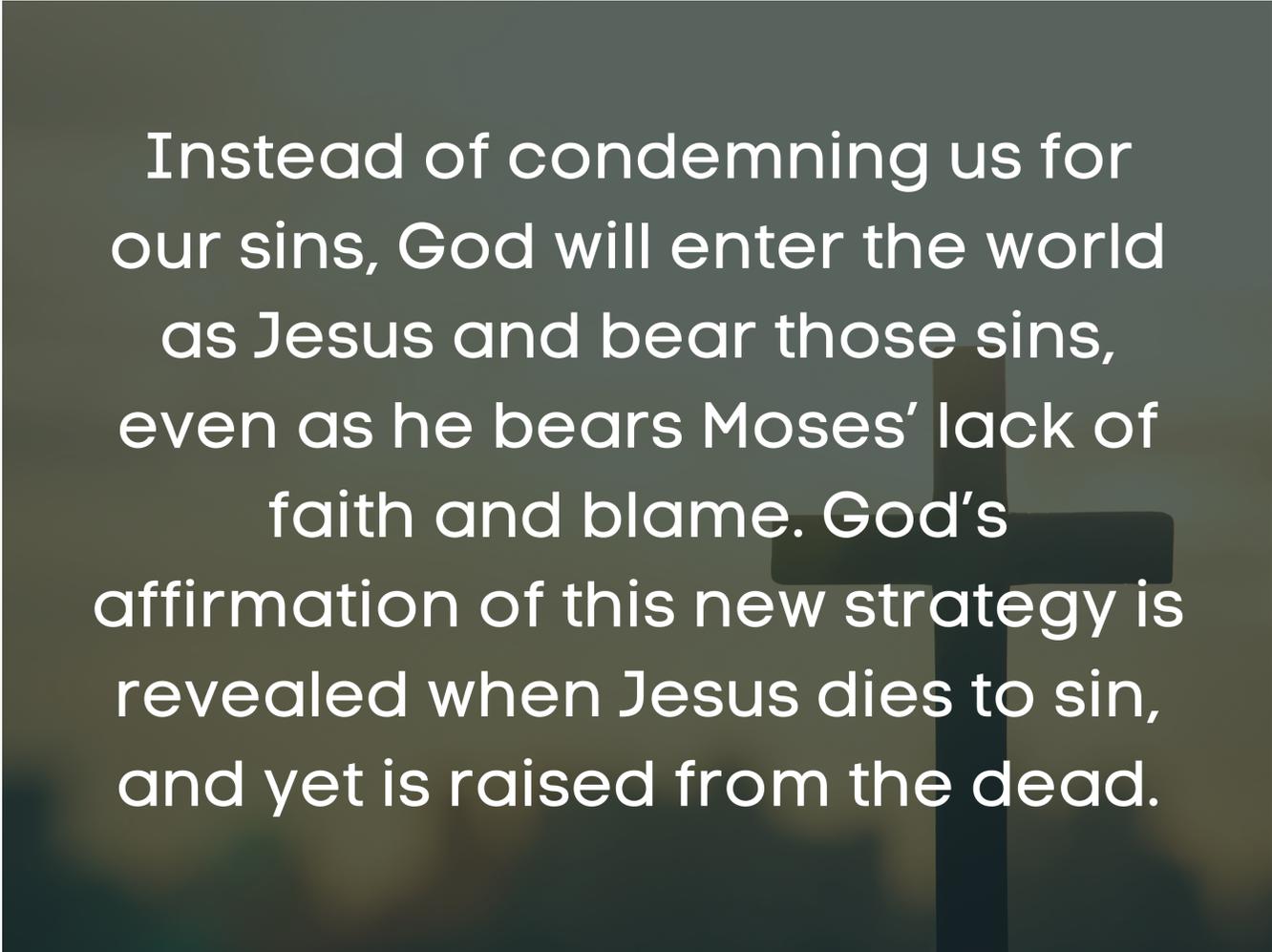
Leaders who make mistakes but deflect blame? Anyone who has worked in a bureaucracy has seen that. As much as we fear admitting it, maybe we’ve been in that position once or twice. How do we respond when we make expensive mistakes?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Powerless

Moses is powerless to save the Israelites. In his despair, he turns to blame God. He knows that he—and they—are about to die, but he has no idea how to fix it. Would it be surprising if God decided to replace Moses with a more trusting and/or competent leader?

Depending on their mistakes, leaders might get fired, or their actions may have severe consequences for those they lead. At a certain point, the leader cannot do anything to remedy the

problem.



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Jesus bears our sins (from Canva)

PROGNOSIS: God Is Powerful

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Powerful

Instead of killing Moses for his lack of faith, God provides a different solution: life. God will provide water to the Israelites, and strengthen Moses' leadership position. This foreshadows God's solution to our sin. Instead of condemning us for our sins, God will enter the world as Jesus and bear those sins, even as he bears Moses' lack of faith and blame. God's affirmation of this new strategy is revealed when Jesus dies to

sin, and yet is raised from the dead.

God's willingness to die for our sins means we can place those sins on God. A leader may be fired, but there will be new life. This might require a miracle in our current work environment, but there are many forms that new life can take other than restoring the status quo.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting

God's response to Moses is to tell him to go to Horeb and strike a rock with a staff. It sounds ridiculous to modern ears and may have sounded ridiculous at the time. Water doesn't just spring out of rocks. Yet the faith in Moses enables him to trust the Lord without fear. From Moses' faith springs water that the people can drink.

Trust in a new life promised by God means we are freed to pursue new endeavors—even those that may seem beyond our imagination. Maybe it's another chance as a leader, maybe it is moving in a new direction. These changes are less scary because we trust that God will see us through.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Serving Is Harder

Serving the people by providing water ended up being simple. Hit a rock with a stick. But we know how the story continues. Holding the stick up for a whole day is the next challenge, followed by arbitrating disputes amongst thousands of people.

Serving did not get easier. But Moses had help from his faith and his fellow believers. The people don't challenge Moses when it comes to holding up the stick, nor does Moses cry to the Lord about it. He does it, with the aid of others. Similarly, in the next challenge, Moses does not have to judge the people's disputes alone.

For us, doing new things is hard, and gets harder with age. Living by faith, fear doesn't have to be an obstacle, but doing may still feel difficult. So we trust that both God and the community of believers will hold up our arms when we are tired, and giving us advice and aid.