

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family**Title: God Who Calls Us****Lesson: Exodus 17:1-7**

17 The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?" ³ But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" ⁴ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD answered Moses, "Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

First of all, I want to say a big thank you to my fellow parishioners for warmly welcoming and hosting my parents. I'm grateful to everyone who came to the parish picnic meal and to those who put in time and effort to cook delicious food for the event. I also want to give a special shout-out to the Bell Choir for their beautiful music. The parish picnic was enjoyable for everyone, but it was a special time for my parents. They got to experience the fun of a potluck, savor a variety of tasty dishes and desserts, and thoroughly enjoy the Bell Choir's performance. And if you were there, you'll remember my mom enthusiastically shouting, "Encore! Encore!" when the performance was over.

It's been five years since their son got married, and this is their first time visiting his home. They tried to come see us three years ago, but their plans were hindered by Covid. They've seen bits of our life here through photos, videos, and video calls, but you know, those were not enough. During this visit, they got to see our home layout, room arrangements, the kitchen, and even how the three churches I serve with are structured, all in person.

The past Tuesday was my birthday, and the past Friday was Korean Thanksgiving Day, also known as Chuseok. It was my first birthday and Thanksgiving Day spent with my parents in five years since getting married. It was an incredibly precious time for me. Once again, I want to express my gratitude to all of you and thank God.

Exodus 17:1-7 is a story about the Israelites. They left Egypt and ended up in a desert with no water. They got really thirsty and started complaining about Moses and God.

People often want to go back to the past. Do you agree with that? Do you sometimes think like, "Those were good times," "My 30s were great," "My 50s were wonderful," or "Life was better 10 years ago"? If you do, it means you agree that we tend to want to go back in time.

The Israelites were not so different from us. They were slaves in Egypt, living under harsh oppression without freedom. They were denied opportunities for education, the right to vote, and treated unequally compared to the Egyptians. Their daily routine consisted of hard labor for Egypt all day long, except for sleeping and eating times. Their days were tough, and it must have felt like an unbearable situation with no hope.

When the Israelites cried for help, God felt sorry for them. So, God chose Moses to lead them out of Egypt, and Moses listened to God and did what He said. Moses miraculously split the Red Sea, saving the Israelites and giving them their freedom. They must have been very happy to be free. But their happiness didn't last long because the wilderness where they had to live as free people was a difficult place to survive.

People need essential things to survive. Even if they had clothes from Egypt, they didn't have enough food to eat every day or safe homes to live in. The Israelites really wanted to be free, but the reality of freedom was not what they had hoped for or expected.

In the wilderness, they got hungry. Their hunger made it hard for them to see and hear God's grace. It took away their happiness from being free. They forgot that God was with them, always helping. Their hunger made them start doubting God, and they got mad at Moses and God. Surprisingly, their hunger even made them miss the days when they were slaves in Egypt, even though they now had freedom.

Moses led them into the wilderness, so they began blaming him for all their troubles. However, in the barren wilderness, Moses was unable to provide for their needs, as it was God, not Moses, who had delivered them from Egypt. Moses was aware of this, so all he could do was pray to God and ask for help. Before long, God answered Moses' prayer, providing the Israelites with manna and quail to eat.

But, this time, the Israelites began to feel thirsty and began blaming Moses for all their troubles.

Whenever the Israelites had problems and asked God for help, He was there, listening to their prayers and helping them. But, again and again, they forgot about God's grace, how He kept them safe, and showed them the way. They started to doubt God, got mad at Moses and God, and even wished they could go back to the time when they were slaves in Egypt.

Whenever I read about the Israelites forgetting God's grace, doubting Him, and blaming Him, it feels like my own story, and it makes me feel ashamed. So, I often pray for repentance to God.

When I read about the Israelites forgetting God's grace, doubting Him, and getting mad at Him, it feels like I'm reading about my own life, and it makes me feel ashamed. So, I frequently pray and ask God for forgiveness.

Back when I was in college, I was just an average student. But then, by a fortunate twist of fate, I got the chance to work in a ministry in Korea where people from different cultures and countries, not often seen in Korea, came together. While working there, I started to feel a strong sense of purpose and a calling to ministry that I believed God had given me. This led me to prepare for studying abroad in the United States.

The process of getting ready to study abroad wasn't easy. My English skills were a challenge, and my parents couldn't afford to fully support my education overseas. However, God led me to Claremont School of Theology and provided a full scholarship for my tuition, allowing me to study. I also had the chance to work as an intern pastor at an American United Methodist Church, and with some financial help from my parents and stipends from the church, I could cover the cost of housing and living expenses in the United States.

At the time of my graduation, I had expected to receive an appointment from the California-Pacific Conference. However, in 2020, when Covid-19 spread across the United States and most churches transitioned to online worship, they encountered financial hardships and were not actively seeking new pastors. Despite my graduation, I hadn't received any news of an appointment from the Cal-Pac Conference, so my family and I were getting ready to return to Korea. This was in late May, and most conferences were nearing their Annual Conferences. It meant that I was too late in reaching out to these conferences to request consideration for an appointment.

Before returning to Korea, I reached out to numerous conferences, including Wisconsin, sending them my resume and personal statement and requesting them to consider appointing me. However, all the responses I received were along the lines of it being too late for the current year and suggesting that I reapply next year. Wisconsin also advised me to consider applying to the Iowa Conference. With no other options but to return to Korea, I asked my parents to keep a room empty for us at their home during that time.

However, just one week later, I received a contact from Wisconsin. They mentioned that the chances of getting an appointment were quite slim but encouraged me to apply nonetheless. It was at that time when my son was only two months old. I took care of him when he was awake, and during his naps, I slowly prepared my application, gathering all the necessary documents for the Wisconsin Conference. Afterward, I went through a

complex process that involved interviews with two pastors from the cabinets, two pastors from the Board of Ordained Ministry, and an interview with SPRC. Finally, on September 1, 2020, I began serving at Willow River Parish.

I'll ask you this: Am I standing before you right now because of my own abilities? Or is it because God has called me and led me? It's because God has called me and guided me all along.

So, was I always happy while serving Willow River Parish? While there were many joyful moments, there were also times of difficulty.

Even though the Israelites experienced God's grace and that God was with them, whenever they encountered hardships and difficulties, they forgot and began complaining during hard times, even longing for their days in Egypt. I felt like I was quite like the Israelites when dealing with challenges in both ministry and life. Reading their story feels like mine, and it humbles me, leading me to pray for repentance to God.

Not long ago, when I said goodbye to my parents at the airport and came back home, I had a lot of mixed emotions. To be honest, it was very sad, and my mind was filled with many thoughts. I can't pinpoint exactly what those thoughts were, but I can say that I didn't feel all that different from the Israelites who forgot God's grace.

After my vacation ended and I returned to the church to prepare for worship, I prayed in the sanctuary and read the story of Exodus 17. During that time, God brought to my mind all the ways in which He had called and led me, and He made me realize the areas where I fell short. I offered a tearful prayer of repentance to God.

Moses couldn't provide water for his people in the wilderness because there was nothing there. All he could do was pray to God. Believing God was with him, Moses struck the rock as God commanded, and water flowed to quench their thirst. It wasn't Moses or the staff that was special; it was what God did.

Friends, who is the master of the church? Who is the one doing the ministry? Who is the master of your life? The master of our lives is God. The master of the church is God, and the one conducting ministry is God. We simply rely on and obey God's word.

May we all remember and be thankful for God's grace, which is always with us, guiding our lives. Amen.