

# **“Water from the Rock” by Margreta Silverstone**

**September 28, 2014**

**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

## **Complaining and Call**

I'm one of these folks that generally preach about once a year and celebration circle has been trying to get me to pony up to this place for a few months now. I am not sure where I built in that the preacher's goal here at Seekers is to connect to the scripture, connect to your own personal story and connect to the life of Seekers. Oh, and during recommitment season is particularly helpful to talk about that somehow. That is a lot to accomplish within 2500 words, but I will try.

When Glen sent out the photo of Dave McMakin and others from Seekers life, including Mary Carol, my spouse particularly enjoyed the description Glen gave to the names and history of the people, particularly Dave's: Used to work for the government in various capacities, dealing with planning, logistics, and organizationalizing. My hope, if Glen sends a photo of me around after I have left this place, is that the brief description of me that he provides to others sounds like what he said of Dave and maybe also mentions being an art quilter or mom to Oslin.

Let me also say, I have been a part of Seekers church since 1989 when I moved to the DC area for graduate studies at The George Washington University. The pastor of the church where I attended in Grand Rapids, Michigan basically told me that I had to attend the Church of the Saviour and I never doubted his perspective. I showed up at 2025 Massachusetts Ave initially at the School of Christian Living on a Tuesday night as I did not have a class on Tuesday. It

took a bit to get connected enough into Seekers to then find a ride to church on Sunday mornings (I lived in Falls Church and the metro didn't run). So, for 25 years Seekers has been my faith community and I intend to recommit in October.

### **Exodus 17: 1 – 7**

It was sort of odd to realize just in preparing for this sermon that I've been around here for 25 years (half of my lifetime). Somehow, those measures make wandering around in a desert for 40 years less baffling. When you are 9 years old, like Oslin, 40 years is beyond imagination.

I find the Exodus story pretty amazing. I don't know how much time has transpired between Exodus 16 , last week's Old Testament story, and this week's story in Exodus 17. But we seem to be repeating the same complaint with slightly different circumstances. And, since last week's complaint was answered, why are the people worried now about water to drink? Why are they repeating the refrain that life is unfair? Can't they see that that past patterns of history would conclude that somehow things will work out? And, since Moses was the one who helped them the last time see how God had provided for them, why are they threatening him this time?

Couldn't Moses, as their servant leader, see that God would continue to provide too? So how come he seems to be worried about getting himself stoned? How come I am worried about a former member of this faith community walking through the door with his anger and mental illness? I know others are watching the door. I know I started my professional career so many years ago as a crisis counselor with dually diagnosed mentally ill and substance abusing men. So why do I worry about God taking care of me now?

For whatever reason, I can understand how preposterous it is to claim that life is unfair, that God is just going to let me die. Amazingly, God doesn't seem to lose patience. God keeps providing a way – providing food, providing water, providing an escape, providing guidance by day and night. I do think God was frustrated at the

people in Exodus. As one commentator noted, the name of the place where the water came out of the rock was afterwards called Massah (test) and Meribah (quarrel).

I like to think that I am better than them. I am not. In 25 years of being in Seekers and 50 years of life, I don't remember to shut up about life being unfair. In the face of whatever seems like "the bottom" , whether losing my job, multiple miscarriages, or having to show up in DC on a greyhound bus with a bicycle and a suitcase, I get lost in the immediate need. Somehow I do not believe I am the only one who gets trapped in the "unfair" complaint. I believe we all get short sighted or go short memory, particularly when our bodies are breaking down due to illness or hunger or thirst.

Life is unfair. But, that isn't the point. What will I choose to do next? Complain? God manages to work through that and provides.

### **Matthew 21:23-32: Call**

Turning to the gospel, like the Pharisees, I don't want to admit my own mistakes. I'd rather evade the subject. In Matthew, the religious establishment wants to know by what right Jesus comes into the temple and start teaching. And, Jesus knows that this is a trap and that they are focused on the wrong things. But, he doesn't claim "unfair", he traps them in a question and leaves them unwilling to answer. They have to keep their cries of unfair stuffed inside.

Jesus goes on telling stories. Because I've been reflecting on this set of passages for a while now, I have been able to talk with Oslin about the importance and difference about what I say and what I do. With the two brothers, when the dad asks them to go work in the vineyard on the farm, the one says he will and doesn't, the other complains bitterly and throws a tantrum but then eventually does do it. And, ultimately, the one who did the work is really the one who completed the task that his dad asked him to do. For me, I use it as a message of importance about our work showing up our words. Of course, I don't really want to have to deal with Oslin throwing verbal tantrums at me along the way to getting the work done (but that is

what our heavenly parent endures).

Life is unfair. But, that isn't the point. Even what I choose to do next is not the point either. If I fall into that trap, I may be putting myself in the same place as Moses and the religious leaders and believe too much in my own abilities, believe that I have some special status with God and can do things my way (along with God's way).

### **Call to Action**

For past few years, I've been struggling with and haven't been able to fully unravel a different concept that is an important component of Seekers. I'm not sure what I know to be the truth or dark magic of something that Seekers has named as "call". I intend to recommit to Seekers but this is one area that continues to challenge me and I want to take some time to explore and explain this challenge with you. Call and the regular written spiritual report are not easy parts of the commitment for me.

When I first brought up the parable about the Dad asking his two sons to go do the same job, Jeffrey wanted to know what the job was. I think I sort of flippantly replied that it didn't really matter what the job was, given the historical culture probably something out in the land, the issue was that God asked them to do the same task and one said that he would and didn't and the other said he wasn't going to do it, but then did.

When I got married, in the wedding vows exchanged between Jeffrey and I, I asked him to include supporting me in my call (or commitment) to public service. He didn't have a career commitment for me to support him in. Somehow, I believed that for Seekers I had to name a call to something pretty big and incredible and impossible in order to be a "core member" or "steward" of Seekers church.

So the struggle that I have with the parable in Matthew and my last few years of experience of call is that if someone asked me, "How's that call to public service working out for you?" I don't have an easy response. Sometimes I've been like the hired hands from last

week, called at that last hour or told to go home early. Sometimes, I've found the mix of paid work and creative respite and family time to be an odd juggling act. I love making purses and bags and fabric items but it doesn't pay the bills. It energizes me to keep doing the other work I do. I see an increasing need to be present to Oslin as he grows and makes his way in this world. I see aging parents. And, in the middle of all of this, I find people who have made connections to me over time and want my critical thinking skills and writing skills and ability to negotiate. Over the past nine months, I've been paid to provide some level of support and analysis for information systems projects across the country for short term assignments. I was in Atlanta for a few days at the beginning of this week for a conference sponsored by the APHSA about Information Systems Management. Since I keep finding these gigs, it simply made the most sense to stay open and available to more of these types of needs. I spent two great days reconnecting with people I have known for over 15 years and hear what their lives have been up to and what new things motivate them.

I am not sure that my bias about call is really a challenge to Seekers or a reset button that I need to use on my own expectations. I've appreciated that Seekers doesn't have a corporate call, except to equip us all to be people of faith. I've appreciated that Seekers has ways to put calls down so that folks can make space for other things. I've appreciated that Seekers can have mission groups that do not always tie closely to personal calls, but do keep us connected. And, as a continuing member of Koinonia, I stay committed to making us a welcoming place, one that invites people to have a seat at the table for a conversation and I celebrate the diversity that I see in Sunday worship and other times.

If call is to find a place and a way to be committed to something bigger than myself and to help out, is it OK to be committed to a number of areas? I hope so. Somehow those Israelites in the desert spent a generation just wandering around trying to raise a family in some hard times and have God provide for them. The society in Jerusalem during Jesus time didn't have the complexity that our society does today and his call was often about just doing what was

asked or following him.

### **Philippians 2:1-13: Call to Care**

And, in the New Testament reading, I generally find an amplification of the key concept from the Gospel. In this case, I am encouraged, and the rest of the faith community is encouraged, to think and care about others more than myself.

What that exactly looks like in your life or in mine isn't spelled out, just an attitude of love and care for others. The details of what needs to happen will be presented when I need to know them.

The past couple of years of my life have certainly been a moment by moment thing. And, at times I walk away from whatever the recent moment was and think, "Wow, did that really just happen?" In Atlanta, since I had worked remotely with one person over the course of six months, I found myself in her company and learning that I had asked if she needed my help just as her own health issues were making her believe that she had to default on an obligation.

The DC Child and Family Services Chief Information Officer relayed a complaint about an event he attended. He named what he was thirsty for and sad that he hadn't been satisfied. I chatted with the Washington state child welfare technical director and, in the backdrop of that conversation, heard a similar complaint and thirst. I brought the two of them together later in the day to talk to each other. I was amazed at the transformation in the Washington state director as he was energized and open and grateful.

The week prior, in coming back from Seattle to honor my mother's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, I got into a teasing conversation about seats on the airplane with a fellow traveler (he thought that I was overstepping and taking the window seat rather than the aisle). Yet the conversation that ensued in a teasing argumentative way led to revelation that he was running for Congress in the House of Representatives for the Yakima WA area, had a similar immigrant background and religious upbringing (but we had both left the CRC) and

a discussion about what he was about to try and spend a part of his life doing. I think we both walked away from that flight energized and encouraged.

And, I still do not know how much of my time needs to be spent on the many areas where God seems to want me to spend some time and attention. I may have a month where my child welfare work for the District is lighter and unclear when the next piece will start. The conversation at home is about whether that translates into building more study skills into Oslin or other activities to support an aging mother in law. Is this dailyness call?

Is there something in all of this that can help you take a drink of God's water and see beyond the immediate need? Or something that you can share to help a new definition of call come? What does the cool bit of water that you leave for another look like?