

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting  
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When Water Flows from Rocks  
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Exodus 17:1-7

17From 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. <sup>2</sup>The people quarrelled 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?’ <sup>3</sup>But 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?’ <sup>4</sup>So Moses cried out to the LORD, ‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’ <sup>5</sup>The 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. <sup>6</sup>I 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. <sup>7</sup>He called the place Massah\* and Meribah,\* because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’

Message

In the story we’ve read this morning, the Israelites are in the desert, and they’re feeling lost and abandoned by God. Everything is uncertain and scary, and they are thirsty and they can’t see where they will get water from. I think that right now, this is a situation that nearly every person in the world can related to. We’re in a pandemic, and everything is uncertain. Many people are scared, and lots of people are in need—and they cannot see where the provision is going to come from.

In Belize City, I work with people who live in a situation like that all the time. Poverty is pervasive here, and when you have very few resources, the future is always uncertain. You are always in need of something and you don’t usually know where it will come from.

In this morning’s Bible story, we read about how Moses handles the situation. He prays. And God tells him to take some elders and go hit a rock. Moses does this and water comes out of the rock. Not a little water, either. Enough water to quench the thirst of thousands and thousands of people and their animals.

As I meditated on this story, I started to see this as a story of when we get stuck in life. We have a problem and we just don’t see how to fix it. We look around and everything is dry and lifeless—hard and unmoving. We feel thirsty in a desert with no water in sight. One of my favorite parts of my job is being able to witness how people handle this feeling of being stuck. I get to be an elder that people take with them while they go hit a rock. So I want to tell you a few stories from Belize City about people who are hitting rocks and finding lifegiving water.

This week I’ve spent a lot of time with a young man named Jacob. Jacob has been attending our church since the winter—or what passes for winter in the tropics. Since I was not able to go to the Triennial in Kenya this summer, I was

able to get to know Jacob while he helped me and Oscar plan the summer outing, and this is what I learned. Jacob was feeling stuck. He graduated from high school two years ago at the age of 16. When I asked what he's doing now, I learned that he was looking for a job so that he could pay to continue his education. I asked what kind of job he was looking for. He said, "Honestly, Ms Nikki, anything that will pay me." What he really wanted was to go to the University of Belize for Sixth Form (which is like an Associate's degree in the USA), and then get his Bachelor's so he can be an accountant.

So I asked around and I couldn't find a job for him, but my asking did stir up something else... A scholarship for Jacob to go to Sixth Form. He was amazed and excited and nervous. We started making plans for getting him registered. Then he said, "Oh Ms, I think I want to start in January instead." Then he stopped responding to messages and he stopped coming to church for a couple of weeks.

Last Sunday he was back at church, and while I was driving him home, I asked more questions. He let me know that he was nervous to start school. It's been so long since he was in school last time. And he's worried about anger—he gets very angry sometimes and he doesn't want to have fights in school. Anger, I said, is a reason to go to therapy of some sort, not a reason to stay out of school. And the only way to get used to studying again is to do it! He agreed to go with me and Oscar to the university and ask questions. No pressure to start in August, I reminded him. Just see what the options are at this point in the summer. So this week, Oscar and I went with Jacob to the university to ask questions. Jacob got excited. He does want to start in August after all. He is tired of being at home with nothing to do. We have also requested an AVP workshop for our church so that Jacob can learn some peaceful strategies for dealing with stress and conflict. Things are looking up!

We looked at the list of all the documents he needs. Among them are his diploma and transcripts from high school. He looked at me. Ms Nikki, I don't know about that. I have unpaid school fees at my high school. I don't know if they will give me my diploma.

Oscar and I looked at each other. Ah ha! Now the truth comes out!

Jacob has been feeling stuck, not just from nerves, and not just from fears about fights. Jacob has been feeling the weight of a debt that is keeping his education trapped in his childhood. He did all the work to graduate, but he has no diploma because his family was not able to pay his school fees! This jumbled mess is quite a rock for Jacob to hit. And for the past two years, he's been feeling alone, living in its shadow, his soul parched and dry, not knowing how to hit it.

So Oscar and I, in the car that day, got to serve as Jacob's elders, accompanying him up to the rock, making plans with him for how to hit it, supporting him and providing community for him as he hits it. He is taking courage and strength from our accompaniment, and he is hitting the rock. We've made a plan, and he's working the plan, and slowly, I can see water starting to

trickle out of this rock—progress in Jacob’s mind and life as he moves towards registering for Sixth Form.

Peter is another person who was stuck. He and his brother were 13 years old when they finished primary school and took the PSE, which is a standardized test that enables kids to get into high school. They did really poorly on that test and came to Belize Friends school. They could not read very well, and they did not know very much math. Peter was put into our reading program, and in just two years, he improved his reading and went through our PSE prep program. His brother dropped out, but Peter persisted. He got into some trouble this past December, which is how Oscar and I got involved in his life as elders accompanying him to the rock of his academic and social struggles. And he persisted. A pandemic broke out. Peter had trouble finishing his homework at home, but he did graduate.

Then came the time to apply to high school. He avoided it for weeks. His mom filled out some applications. Still, he was so nervous that he took a really long time to fill out the remaining forms, even with me and Oscar in the room with him encouraging him. Oscar and I went with Peter to drop off his applications. He ended up getting accepted into all three of the schools he applied for and he registered at what he calls his “dream school,” which in fact is one of the most prestigious high schools in Belize. The joy on Peter’s face, when I asked how he felt after he’d applied to Wesley, is proof of the water flowing from the rock that he is hitting.

Right now, he is registered, he has his uniforms and books and supplies and he is just waiting for school to be able to open. There is so much water flowing from Peter’s rock that sometimes he worries he is going to be knocked down by it. He is still struggling with reading and math, and he gets frustrated and nervous by that sometimes. As an elder he has brought with him to the rock, I remind him that he is surrounded by a loving community of people that are supporting him. And even when he does get pulled under, he is very good at swimming underwater anyways.

The pandemic has been a huge rock for our world in general, and our ministry in Belize is no exception to that. Our team has spent hours in meetings over the last five months, looking at the newest developments, looking at our ministry objectives—holistic care of our students and church youth and community—and seeing how we can change what we do so that we can continue working towards our objectives in a way that is adaptive to our rapidly changing situations. So over the past five months, we have gotten phones and data for students, lent out laptops to youth, brought hundreds to food packages to our community, held youth events that involved both fun movies and deep conversations, gone to a cemetery to grieve with our youth on the first anniversary of the violent deaths of their loved ones, spent hours in chats on social media, met for pastoral care and counseling, ridden in cars blaring hip hop music and singing

boys, had a graduation ceremony. We have discovered, during this summer that we were in Belize instead of in Kenya, that the youth ARE the Quaker church in Belize City, and they have populated our committees for events, food, music, and worship. Covid19 presented a giant rock in a desert for our community and all of us—staff, students and youth—moved towards that rock together and hit it. And waters have flows from it, granting us new life that we could never have anticipated.

So often I think that people picture ministers, especially ministers who are serving as missionaries, as Moses in this story of water springing from the rock. What I find as I work, however, is that we far more often serve as the elders who accompany Moses. The people here know what they need. They have vision for their lives. We simply provide love and support, accompanying people so that they know they aren't alone. We simply participate in a loving community of people who are trying to live into Jesus's vision of the Kingdom of God—a world of justice and love and beauty and peace.

And I believe that every one of us, in our own lives wherever we live—sometimes we are Moses and sometimes we are elders. I don't know what you need this morning—maybe you are Moses today, feeling the need to find a group of elders. But what I love when I consider this story right now are the elders, faceless and nameless in this narrative—simply part of the supportive background in someone else's life. When do we get to be elders? When do we get to remind someone that they are not alone—that they can swim when water gushes so fast it overwhelms—that they are more powerful than they ever knew? When do we get to watch as other people gather their faith and courage to do something so improbable as hitting a rock to find water?