

# ***“You Too, Moses!”***

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

**Corinth Reformed Church**  
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW  
Hickory, North Carolina 28601  
828.328.6196 [corinthtoday.org](http://corinthtoday.org)

*(© 2020 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)*

***A new generation requires new leadership.***

***Numbers 20:1-13***

***October 18, 2020***

(Available in print form at [corinthtoday.org/sermons](http://corinthtoday.org/sermons) or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

## ***Fleeting leadership***

Linda and I have been listening to a book on tape, “The Pioneers,” by David McCullough. It’s about the first settlers of the Ohio Valley in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Much of it is based on the personal correspondence of Manasseh Cutler, an American clergyman, Revolutionary War chaplain, and U.S. Congressman influential in acquiring the Northwest Territory and banning slavery in that part of America.

I was a bit startled to learn in that book about the level of enmity between Thomas Jefferson and Martha Washington, our first President’s widow. Those of us with a casual acquaintance with early American history think of our founding fathers and mothers as having a shared vision of national unity, of having mutual respect.

Instead, Rev. Manasseh Cutler said that the visit of Thomas Jefferson to Mount Vernon in 1801 was “the (second) most painful experience of her life,” next to the death of her husband. Cutler said “she spoke of the election of Mr. Jefferson, whom she considered as one of the most detestable of mankind, as the greatest misfortune our country had ever experienced.”

With all due respect, Mrs. Washington: get over it. Here’s a principle most leaders have a hard time grasping: All leadership is fleeting. Every leader will have to give it up. You too, Moses! The leader Israel needed to lead them out of Egypt was not the leader they needed to take them into Canaan. Apparently Moses hadn’t realized that. He was about to.

## ***Holy in the sight of the people***

Numbers 20 has puzzled Jewish and Christian Bible readers and scholars for over 3,000 years. How can this be fair? The punishment doesn't fit the crime. God tells Moses to "speak to the rock" and instead he strikes the rock twice with his staff. As a result, God says, "You will not bring this community into the land I give them."

If this story seems familiar but different, it's because there's a parallel story in Exodus 17. Some scholars suggest it's the same event, added into the record by different editors. I disagree. Let's start with the earlier story.

Exodus 17 takes place between the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14) and the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). A lot happens in those chapters, but one of the key happenings is the quarreling of "the whole Israelite community" with Moses about the lack of water in the Wilderness of Sin. They ask why Moses brought them out of Egypt "to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst" (3)

Moses goes immediately to God. "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me?" (4). God tells Moses to take some of the elders of Israel to a designated rock. There he is to use the same staff he had used to turn the Nile River into blood and strike the rock in front of the Elders, which he does (5-6). Water gushes.

Now let's look at Numbers 20 and see what's the same and what's different.

Verse 1 begins, "In the first month..." The first month of what year? There's broad consensus that this chapter marks a clear division in the book of Numbers. Numbers records the forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness between the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan. The events of Exodus 16 through Leviticus and then the first 19 chapters of Numbers all take place in the two years of the forty. At Numbers 20:1 we have jumped ahead to Year 40, Month 1.

That's very significant. Those who were over the age of 20 at the time of the Exodus have almost all died. This is a different group – at least the adults are a different group. These people have heard about the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea and the provision of water and quail, but most of them were kids or weren't even born yet when all that happened. Other than the cloud over the tabernacle, the daily provision of manna, and the fact that their clothes and shoes didn't wear out (Deuteronomy 29:5), which had all become just common experience – on the order of miracles you and I take for granted every day – life had been very unremarkable. Make dinner, make conversation, make love, make breakfast, make your bed, make up something to do all day, make a grave when Grandpa dies, then do the same thing every day for forty years.

There are very, very few senior citizens, the best we can tell. Almost everyone is younger than I am now (64). The exceptions are Joshua and Caleb, most likely in their 70s, and three siblings – Moses (almost 120 but still sharp, according to Deuteronomy

34:7), Aaron (123, according Numbers 33:39), and their *older* sister Miriam, who had to be pushing 130 since she was the sister who pulled Moses out of the Nile as a baby!

This demographic finds its way into Numbers 20, Miriam dies in verse 1 and both Moses and Aaron learn they won't make it into the Promised Land. God had told Moses and Aaron after the spy incident that no one over the age of 20 would make it into Canaan except Caleb and Joshua (Numbers 14:30), but I suppose the three siblings had assumed they were exceptions. "You too, Moses!" God says.

Numbers 20 occurs in the Wilderness of Zin (different from "Sin") at a place called "Kadesh," meaning "Holy." Whether this is the same Kadesh where the spies had reported and the community rebelled (Numbers 13:26) is a matter of debate. But both incidents happened in the northeast Sinai Peninsula, not far from the Promised Land.

As in Exodus 17, the crisis is the lack of water. As in multiple previous passages, the discontent spreads throughout the community, and a restless multitude gathers "in opposition to Moses and Aaron."

Their complaint sounds like "déjà vu all over again," to borrow a Yogi Berra quip. Only this time they wish they had died in one of the previous wilderness judgments. They assume they're going to die here. They've now lived for four decades deprived of everything they had left in Egypt and been promised in Canaan – grain and fruit. Besides, they add, "There is no water to drink" (5). They're just mad and discontent.

They're muddling need and want, necessity and luxury. There's all the spiritual difference in the world between asking God to meet your needs and demanding that God fulfill your wants. They are experiencing generational amnesia.

Verse 6 records what happens next: "Moses and Aaron (notice they are named together all through this text) went from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell facedown." Your first thought is, "They're praying." I'm not so sure. A Jewish commentary I read this week notes that more often than not "facedown" in these early books of the Bible is not so much prayer or worship as it is exasperation. It's quite possible Moses and Aaron are not going to the tent to be with God. They are going to the tent to escape from the grumbling assembly. Remember, others are not allowed in that space. Aaron is high priest and Moses has often met God there.

When they got to the tent, "the glory of the LORD appeared to them" (6). This is the same language used on two previous occasions when Moses and Aaron "fell facedown" in exasperation before God (Numbers 14:10; 16:19) – although in those cases the glory was visible to all. This time apparently only to Moses and Aaron.

The LORD speaks to Moses and says, "Take the staff..." (8). Two staffs had been a frequent part of the story since the burning bush – [Moses' staff and Aaron's staff](#). Moses' staff sent the plague of hail, parted the Red Sea, and was held up in the battle

against the Amalekites. Aaron's staff turned into a snake, sent the frogs, and budded into almonds as a supernatural display of his high priestly authority. We're actually not sure whose staff this is in Numbers 20. It doesn't matter. It's been in the Lord's presence and it represents the Power and Presence of God in this moment.

Moses and Aaron are to "take the staff," then "gather the assembly together" (8). Then they are to "Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink." That "you" is plural, referring to Moses and Aaron together. "Y'all will bring...."

What I want you to notice is that God speaks no frustration or anger with the people for their request. That's also true in Exodus 17. The times when God expresses anger with the people is when they openly rebel, or when they demand meat when he provided them bread. When there's overt disobedience and discontent, God becomes their judge. But not when there is legitimate need. Water is legitimate need.

"So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence," the passage continues, "just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock..." (9-10a). So far, so good.

Then Moses spoke to the assembled people. "Listen you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (10b). He's right. They are "rebels," and that's how this generation will be viewed later in the Bible. Psalm 106:32-33 says, "By the waters of Meribah they angered the LORD, and trouble came to Moses because of them for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses' lips."

The story continues: "Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank" (11). If it weren't for verse 12, I think we would conclude there was nothing inappropriate about what Moses said and did. He called a spade a spade and then he did what he did in Exodus 17, only with greater emphasis. I've heard this week, "Moses shouldn't have said, 'Must we bring you water out of this rock?' That's why God punished him." But remember what God had said to Moses and Aaron in verse 8: "Y'all will bring water...." Moses only repeats to people what God had said to him. The LORD honored it. Water gushed out.

Again, if the passage had ended in verse 11, you would say, "Well done, Moses and Aaron. Go God!" That's not what God says in verse 12. God says, "You're not taking these people into the promised land. And we say, "It's not fair!" Let's look at three problems with what Moses and Aaron said and did.

*First, "Because you did not trust me enough..."* This is the problem with striking the rock instead of speaking to the rock. It's not that Moses became angry; it's that he didn't believe God's word was enough.

*Second, “...to honor me as holy...”* Literally “...to sanctify me...” or “to set me apart...” Moses had resorted to the same kind of visual demonstration that had been required to make an impression on Pharaoh and the ex-slaves. In both cases, they needed to see a demonstration of power that directly confronted the gods of Egypt. God is not a God who is worshiped by looking at things. Things are symbols.

Since the people came out of Egypt, God has said, “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” While God was giving that instruction, the people were making a golden calf, for which they were severely punished.

Now the staff has a different purpose. With a new generation, God’s intent is that the staff will be a reminder, not an instrument. The same God who used the staff before must be shown just as powerful with only words. The Israelites need to learn to live by faith, not by sight. They need to be guided by God’s Word, not by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God wants to be honored in this moment as the same God with a different means. Speaking with miraculous effect will sanctify him, will set him apart, will make him holy.

*Third, he did this “in the sight of the Israelites.”* In Exodus 17, even when God was using the staff to smite the rock, Moses was told to strike it “in the sight of the elders of Israel.” And that’s what he did. Moses has made himself a magician with an Egyptian wand and he did it in front of the whole crowd.

He’s not the one to lead the people into Canaan. A new generation requires a different leader. For one thing, they need a younger leader who can lead them into battle. But there’s more. Joshua will be told, “This book of the Law will not depart from your lips. Meditate on it day and night. Be strong and courageous.” Not because you have a staff. No staff is even mentioned in the book of Joshua after 36 mentions in Exodus and Numbers. Joshua will lead with the word of God not a physical token.

This place is named “Quarrel,” just like the place where water gushed in Exodus 17. So what does this text say to us all three millennia later?

### ***Lessons from the Rock***

*Remember, selectively.* Don’t assume God can’t change people and especially don’t assume God will work in the same way. Use your memories – the stories and tokens of the past – to remember who God is and what God can do – not to assume he’ll do the same thing again. He used a staff before; he may not do it this time.

Generational amnesia can be a positive thing. It’s a good thing to “forget” the sins and failures of others. Moses and Aaron needed to do some forgetting on that score. God was willing to give this generation of people the benefit of the doubt and just graciously provide them water. It’s also a good thing to forget the details of exactly how God did whatever he did before. God’s not like an ATM where you can insert your

card, type in your PIN (“It’s me, God!”) and use the touchscreen for predictable results. God is God, and he will not be cornered into repetitive results.

Remember Who’s at work on your behalf, not necessarily How he did it before.

*It’s always about God.* It’s about God’s ability to handle the next change, the next crisis, the next complaint. I know you think it’s about the election or the pandemic or the police or the Supreme Court or the church. It’s not. It’s about the character and attributes of God – “I believe God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” Do you really believe that? The Apostle Paul says of this story, “That rock was Christ!”

I love the quote that’s at the top of your order of service: “We commonly assume that the opposite of trusting God is doubting God. In the Old Testament, the opposite of trusting God is trusting something else, such as another god, or political resources, and thus trusting ourselves. Doubting God doesn’t matter so much as long as you’re doubting the right God.” (John Goldingay)

*It matters what others see.* God is so much more prepared to show grace in this story than Moses is. Yes, there is rebellion here and this new generation will fail more tests before they’re ready to storm Canaan. But at this first failure, a failure based on true need, God is going to give mercy and show patience.

As my colleague Paul Cummings said last night, Moses is like Jonah in this passage. He doesn’t want God to open the rock. He not only escapes, exasperated, to the tent of meeting, he’s still angry when he emerges. He’s not only still mad at the people, he’s mad at God when he says, “You rebels, must we bring water from this rock?” He’s speaking as much to God as to the assembly: “Do I have to do this?”

Grace is not something for only God to show. “You too Moses!” God is saying, judging people is what I alone do. For grace, you’re my partner. Moses wanted God’s disapproval on display. God was ready to open a rock by a word and gush water.

The current issue of *Christianity Today* arrived at our house Friday. The President and CEO, Timothy Dalrymple, notes the division among Americans – and among Christians – in 2020. He reminds us that, “Pandemics come and go. Battles are fought and forgotten. Political powers pass in a blink, and nations rise and fall like the grass beneath the withering sun....

“So what can we do in this painful and perilous moment to reflect the grace of Jesus? We can demonstrate in our behavior that the eternal things remain eternal.” In other words, we can let others see in us that what’s going to matter in eternity is not who we voted for or whether we wore a mask. What’s going to matter is how we lived and shared the eternal word of God.

God wants his character on display. It matters what others see. Amen.