

Hard, But Holy Work

Exodus 17:1-7

After a particularly bad day, a construction worker filed an accident report. He wrote:

“When I got to the building, I saw that the storm had knocked off some bricks from around the top, so I rigged up a beam with a pulley at the top of the building so I could hoist up a couple of barrels worth of bricks. When I’d fixed the damaged area, there were a lot of bricks left over, so I went to the bottom and began releasing the line.

Unfortunately, the barrel of bricks was heavier than I was, and before I knew I what was happening the barrel of bricks started coming down, jerking me up. I decided to hang on since I was too far off the ground by then to let go.

And halfway up, I met the barrel of bricks coming down. I received a hard blow on my right shoulder. I continued to the top, banging my head on the beam and getting my fingers caught in the pulley.

When the barrel hit the ground, it burst, allowing the bricks to spill out, and so I was now heavier than the barrel. And so I started down at high speed. Halfway down, I met the barrel on its way up, and received severe injuries to my shins.

And when I hit the ground, I landed on the pile of spilled bricks. At this point, I lost my presence of mind, and let go of the rope. The barrel came down fast, hitting me in the head and putting me in the hospital.

I respectfully request sick leave.”

Now maybe we haven’t had *that* day, but we’ve had days... days that weren’t everything we wished... days when we are tired of what we do.

We work too many hours... the pension isn’t as good as they make it out to be... the health insurance is confusing... the internet is just slow enough to be irritating... the printer works just fine until you actually need it to work... and why does bereavement time count for family members you’ve never met, but not your close friends?

You have a co-worker that keeps looking at his phone while he’s talking to you... and a co-worker that doesn’t seem to understand personal space (or breath mints)... and a co-worker who seems to feel the need to tell you, “I just sent you an email” ... and a co-worker who keeps eating your lunch out of the staff fridge, no matter how many post-it notes you put on it saying “Do not touch” or how big you Sharpie your name on the bag.

Everybody gets tired of those they work with, even those who work at home – maybe even those who work alone.

Even the best job gets old when paperwork piles up, deadlines loom, problems keep interrupting. Even if we love what we do, we get frustrated.

And being retired is hard. Some days the list of things we have to do is longer and less interesting than it was when we were getting paid to get things done, and we wonder why we ever retired in the first place.

Being a student is hard. People keep telling you how school is the most fun you will ever have in your life, and you wonder how horrible their lives must be for that to be true!

Being unemployed is hard. When someone asks you what you do for a living, what you want to do is punch them. Not really... but, maybe a little.

Being a stay at home parent is hard. You love your children, but they are not rational beings – and they are turning you into an irrational being.

Being a manager is hard. You have to deal with immature people, and you're responsible for motivating unmotivated people. Frankly, the only thing some of them are motivated to do is clock out on Friday afternoon.

Being an educator is hard. You got into this profession because you wanted to help students grow into lifelong learners... but instead your job is to force them to memorize answers for standardized tests.

Being an accountant is hard. You aren't asking others to do your job. But you do wish that for once they wouldn't save every pizza receipt and stop throwing away every important document.

Being in food service is hard. I'm not in favor of capital punishment, but whoever said "the customer is always right" ought to face the firing squad. What they were really saying was "the customer's *money* is always more important than the employee's *dignity*."

Being a doctor or nurse is hard. You wanted to help sick people, but now you spend your days filling out forms for people who want to tell you what you could learn from WebMD.

Being a soldier is hard. You signed up to serve your country, but mostly you feel like you're caught in the endless bureaucratic game of "hurry up and wait." (If you don't know that game, don't worry. Us civilians can play it at the DMV, too.)

We complain about our jobs even though we know that if we'd quit, they'd have a stack of resumes in two days, and sometimes we may have to do work that isn't meaningful. We may become disillusioned with our profession. We may have to put our goals on hold while we deal with problems. Sometimes we don't have a choice about moving on.

Somedays our lives are boring, and somedays are so difficult that we wish they were boring.

Moses was having one of those days when he wished it was boring and wonders what he signed up for.

His new job started out so well. Moses told Pharaoh, “Let my people go,” and Pharaoh did it! Moses leads a mass exodus through the Red Sea. Pharaoh and his army drown there. The Israelites dance. It’s the greatest escape in history. Things are going great. A pillar of cloud leads them by day, and a pillar of fire lights their path by night. God even provides manna and quail each morning for food. God is watching out for them.

And then what seems like about 5 minutes later, the people are talking about removing Moses from office.

They just got to the desert! I mean, they are still three chapters from getting the Ten Commandments, and they are already whining.

They travel for three days to Rephidim — a place that isn’t on any map. They are no where. And when they get there (right in the heart of no where) they realize that there is no water and they blame Moses!

They decide the so-called “exodus” was actually an evil plot designed and executed by Moses: “You brought us out of Egypt for this — *Egypt*, a place whose *name* means ‘many waters.’ You brought us out here into the desert so that we could die of thirst? Thanks a lot, Moses...”

And Moses, for his part, thinks, “What a bunch of whiners! You were slaves until I showed up, and now you’re acting like a bunch of six year-olds complaining about a glass of water. They call it the desert for a reason.”

If you remember, Moses was dragged kicking and screaming into this job, and now the people are ready to kill him for taking it. And, *we* are supposed to think the Israelites are acting childish — but is asking about the plan for water when your leader has led you into the desert is that unreasonable?

Moses asks, “What am I supposed to do with this people?” and you might think that God would be upset by all the complaining — but God seems fine.

“Moses, remember that staff you hit the River Nile with and parted it? Take it in your hand and I’ll be waiting for you on a rock. Hit the rock, and you’ll get more water than the people of Israel could ever drink.”

It sounds like magic.

Some read the story and think Moses hit a rock and water started pouring out... or maybe Moses found a rock covering a spring, and pushed the rock out of the way... or maybe water gushing from a rock is a metaphoric way of saying that even in the desert God was with them.

Moses named the place Massah and Meribah, which means “Complain” and “Argue.” I don’t know about you, but I’ve visited a few Baptist churches in my time that maybe ought to consider changing their name to Massah and Meribah Baptist Church.

“Complain” and “Argue...”

It’s not because they *complain* about being thirsty, but because they *argue* that their difficulties suggest that God isn’t with them...

And the thing is, God doesn’t seem to mind that either! They complain about water and they get water.

The Israelites write songs about this moment in the wilderness when the people complain. There are five psalms that put this peculiar story to music. You’d think that they’d want to forget this embarrassing moment, but Israel sings about their grumbling and about *God’s patience*.

They sing because the water they were thirsty for was right there, just under the surface, all along. Right at the height of their frustration, water flows from a rock as a sign that God is with them.

The question the frustrated Israelites ask, “Is God with us or not?” is a question we ask, too.

Somedays are filled with frustrations, with difficulties, with problems – and on those hard days, God cares for us. Now, sometimes God does call us away from hard work that is no longer life-giving. But more often God calls us in the midst of the work we do.

We usually do better if we see God *not* as a solution to problems, but as hope in the midst of frustration.

When we can’t change a situation completely, we can choose how we will live within it – with kindness and hopefulness. God calls us to joy, but joy often comes by the path that takes us *through* difficulty and sacrifice, and not around them.

It is a good gift that we – peculiar, frustrated, wonderful people that we are – long for more... more meaning, more purpose. The dissatisfaction that gnaws at us, the craving to not simply get by is God calling us to God.

And, believe it or not, that “gnawing” feeling is precisely where God wants us: not satisfied, but longing; not satiated, but thirsty.

“As the deer longs for water,” says the Psalmist, “so my soul longs for you, O God” (42:1). You see, there are no days in which God isn’t present — calling us to more, inviting us to see that our lives are incredible.

Being retired is *holy* when you’ve had a full day, and people are better because of what you’ve done for them.

Being a student is *holy* when you’ve encountered some new idea, some new knowledge and the path before you into a fuller self is opened and you now know in what direction you should be walking.

Being unemployed is *holy* when the bitterness you feel gives way to the hope that’s beyond understanding.

Being a stay-at-home parent is *holy* when even after a long, exhausting day, your little one curls up in your lap and sleeps so tenderly on your shoulder that you know you are right where you’re supposed to be.

Being a manager is *holy* when you see all the hard work light a spark in an employee, and it’s like light just broke through the clouds.

Being an educator is *holy* when the student you initially thought was a lost cause finally settles in and comes to class thirsty to learn what you know.

Being an accountant is *holy* when you find a better way and help a person who was about to give up.

Being in food service is *holy* when you see that tired family who drug themselves out of the car and into the restaurant booth after a long, long day, and they finally get a moment to be together as a family around a warm meal.

Being a doctor or nurse is *holy* when the patient gets better — and you don’t want to take too much credit... but you were right... and WebMD was wrong.

Being a soldier is *holy* when all of that training and all of that hard work and all of that sacrifice is used to protect someone from danger who wouldn’t be able to protect themselves.

Our lives are *holy*
when God provides peace and comfort in the midst of what is,
when God unsettles us enough to keep us thirsty for more,
when, even in the midst of our deserts,
we trust that God is already there,
giving us enough to drink to keep on going.

Amen.