

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost ✠

October 2, 2005

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?”

Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the LORD made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them. He said, “If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.”” (Ex. 15:22-26, NIV)

When my family and I moved to California, one of the things we had to do was to find new doctors. That wasn't really a problem, but we did find out that before our new doctor will see us as patients, we would have to have an initial visit to establish that we would be under this doctor's care. We have to know if this doctor is willing to care for us.

It appears they didn't have anything like this in Jesus' day. In the Gospel for today a paralyzed man was brought to Jesus—he didn't even have an appointment! They just plopped him down in front of Jesus, sure that Jesus *could* and *would* help their paralyzed friend. They were right. Jesus showed that he wanted to care for their friend by first of all caring for his soul—forgiving the man's sin. Then he also showed that he cared for the man's body as well by healing him.

In the Old Testament lesson for today, God shows that he feels the same way. He demonstrates that he wanted to care for the people of Israel. And he shows that he wants to take care of *us*. **God wants to care for us.** He wants to care for our bodies and he wants to care for our souls.

Just days before this incident in our text, Israel had celebrated the fact that the Lord had delivered them from the Egyptians by dividing the Red Sea, so they could walk through the Sea on dry ground. Just days earlier they had been surrounded by a wall of water on their right and on their left; and yet the ground under their feet was completely dry.

Now they had been traveling for three days into the desert, and the ground under feet was still dry, but there was no water to be seen. Here they were, more than a million people, who hadn't had water for three days. Imagine a city three times the city of Modesto going without water for even three days. Then when they reached a place that did have water, they couldn't drink it because it was bitter. So at the very least we can understand why the people grumbled to Moses and asked, "What shall we drink?" It was a perfectly reasonable question. They had a big problem. If they didn't have water, they would all die.

So Moses called out to the Lord. We aren't told what Moses said, but we know that God immediately responded. God showed Moses some wood, and when Moses threw the wood into the water, the water became sweet. Now they had water to drink. God's people were in great need, and God took care of their problem with a great miracle.

Problem solved, right? Now the people could go back to life as normal, right? They were still a huge group of people setting off into the desert. This would not be the last time that these people would be without water. And it's not the last time that they would complain about it and that God would miraculously provide water for them. It wasn't the last time, but it was the first time. It was right away at the beginning of this journey that would end up taking 40 years, 40 years of wandering in the desert.

It seems that right at this time God wanted to make something very clear to his people. He wanted to tell them that he wanted to care for them. He wanted them to rely on him, for their water. Later on he would also provide food (manna and quail) for them when there was nothing else to eat. He says to them, I want to care for you. I want you listen carefully to my voice, pay attention to my commands, hold on to my decrees. I want to take care of you. I am the Lord, who heals you.

Most of us have never faced life-threatening thirst. Many of us have never faced *any* serious life-threatening situation. We haven't needed God to miraculously provide care for our bodies. But isn't that exactly what he does for us? Is it anything but a miracle that God has created our bodies in the first place—our bodies that allow us to live and work and play? Isn't it really a miracle that God has provided exactly the right kinds of nourishment that our bodies need to stay healthy; and doesn't God provide everything that we need for our bodies and lives? God tells us in his Word, here and in many other places, "I want to care for you. I want you to rely on me to care for you."

When we hear God say these things to us in his Word (now), he prepares us for the time when our lives are threatened. He prepares us for the times when we don't know how this paycheck will last until the next one. He prepares us for the doctor's test results that say, you are very sick; you will not recover. He prepares us for times of need; for times

of sadness. He reminds us that he wants to take care of us. He will take care of us just as he has in the past and just as he is doing right now.

I think that most people have a general tendency to avoid going to a doctor. Either we feel that whatever is bothering us will go away, or it's something we can live with. The trouble is that sometimes we may be ignoring something that is very serious, and will only get worse.

When Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, he translated the phrase at the end of our text "I am the Lord, your doctor, or physician." God wanted to tell his people that he wanted to care for them; and at the same time he needed to remind them that they needed his care.

Of course, no one had to tell them that they were getting thirsty. No one had to remind them that they needed care for their bodies. But God did need to remind them that they needed care for their souls.

Their souls were sick. Just days after God had rescued them from the hand of Pharaoh, they thought that God would abandon them. Just days after God spared their lives in Egypt they thought maybe God would let them die in the desert. God said, "I'll take care of you." They said, "We'll believe it when we see it. We'd rather take our chances with Pharaoh. It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert." They seriously thought that God would not take care of them. They doubted God. They were sick with unbelief. And they didn't realize that unbelief is fatal. The soul that denies what God says separates itself from God.

But God shows his people that he also cares for their souls. He is patient with them. He gave them water. And then we read, **"There the Lord made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them. He said, 'If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you.'"**

In the long history of the people of Israel, they often did not listen to the Lord's voice, or do what is right or keep his decrees. They showed time and time again that they were still very sick, very sinful. But the Lord never changed. He never stopped being "the Lord, their physician." He never stopped caring for their souls. He never stopped forgiving the sins of his people. His patience never ran out.

That's a good thing, because it often seems like our sinfulness will never run out either. Whether that is doubting God's care for us or ignoring God's will for us, no matter how hard we try to hide it, or try to overcome it, our souls are sick with sin. And it seems

that there's no cure. The soul that sins is the one that will die. It may even seem that perhaps the disease has spread too far. It may feel like there is nothing any doctor can do--that nothing will heal this sinful heart.

Jesus came into this world as the Great Physician of soul and body. He said, **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick; I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners."** He said to the paralyzed man, "I want to take care of your soul. Your sins are forgiven." He said to the thief dying on the cross, "I want to take care of your soul. You will be with me in paradise." He said to a repentant Peter, "I want to take care of your soul. Take care of my sheep." He says to you, you who are sick unto death with sin, he says to you, "I want to take care of your soul. Your sins are forgiven. You have been washed in my blood. Your sin and guilt are removed. I want to take care of your soul. So this is my body. This is my blood. Take, eat and drink. It heals you. It strengthens you. I want to take care of your soul. Behold, I am coming soon. I am coming to take you to be with me forever."

Jesus comes to us in Word and Sacraments and tells us that he wants to take care of our souls. He heals us with his Word of forgiveness.

In this age of medical specialists, it is often very difficult to build a close relationship with any one doctor. You can be treated for one ailment and see a handful of doctors. We have one Great Physician who comes each of us. In his Word he personally comes to each human heart and says kindly and gently, "I want to care for you. I want to care for your body and be the one to whom you look for everything you need in life. And I want to take care of your soul. I want to forgive your sins. I want to remind you of that forgiveness every day of your life, until the day when I return to bring you to be with me in heaven." May the triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit keep us forever under the care of the LORD, who heals us. Amen.