

Friends and Enemies
[Exodus 17-1-7, Romans 5:1-11](#)
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The winter olympics are over, and all the hockey players who had travelled to Italy to play for their national teams have all come back home, to rejoin their professional teams and get back to the ongoing regular season. And that must be a strange experience. For two weeks, all these players you've been fiercely competing against for most of your life, now they're on your team, you're working together, supporting and encouraging each other, and then as soon as the games are over you go right back to trying to destroy each other. I have to say that as a fan of the Vancouver Canucks, it is really difficult having to cheer for Brad Marchand every few years. I don't like doing it. We like knowing who is on our team and who isn't, who's the good guy and who's the bad guys, who we're supposed to cheer for and who we want to lose.

And of course, this happens in more than just hockey. For most of my life, Canada has had no closer friend, no stronger ally, than our next door neighbour, the United States of America. As President Kennedy once said in a speech to the Canadian Parliament, "Geography has made us neighbours, history has made us friends, economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies. Those whom nature hath so joined together, let no man put asunder." I never would've thought that anything could ever threaten the close partnership and friendship between Canada and the US, and yet

today that relationship has never been more strained, and our Prime Minister is travelling around the world looking for new friendships, new partnerships with China, India, Japan, Australia. We thought we knew who was on our team, who's the good guys and who's the bad guys, but now we're not so sure. All of a sudden, the friendships we thought would always be strong are falling apart, and we're not really sure who's on our side any more.

And it's not really surprising that those relationships are fraying and breaking right now, because they're under a lot of stress and pressure, and pressure has a way of showing how strong a relationship really is. I remember when the Covid-19 pandemic first hit, and at first everyone was trying to stay positive, talking about supporting our health care workers by staying home and flattening the curve, everyone working together to get through the trouble, but it didn't take long before you saw people hoarding toilet paper and bottled water, clearing out store shelves, or buying up supplies of hand sanitizer and anti-viral wipes and then re-selling them online at an enormous mark-up, or just ignoring the danger, ignoring the warnings, insisting that everything was fine and there's nothing to worry about. When we're faced with trouble, real trouble, it is easy to react with fear, or denial, or just outright hostility, and suddenly we stop looking at the people around us as friends, and instead see enemies, more danger, more trouble, someone to avoid, someone to blame, someone to fear.

You can see that happening in our reading this morning from the book of Exodus. The people of Israel have escaped from slavery in Egypt, they've been delivered from Pharaoh through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, and now they're on their way to Mount Sinai, on their way towards the Promised Land, but the road isn't easy. As they move further and further away from Egypt, further and further into the wilderness, things get harder. They're tired. They're hungry. Their feet hurt. There's sand everywhere. They are completely out of toilet paper - not a square to spare anywhere in the entire camp. And with every step, with every challenge, with every little bit of trouble they face, the people get angrier and angrier, tempers flare, patience slips away, and suddenly they are looking at the people around them, no longer as their friends and family, but as enemies, as rivals, as the source of all their troubles. And when they finally make camp at Rephidim and there is no water to drink, the crisis bursts. The people turn on Moses and demand water. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? What kind of an operation is this anyway? Are you trying to kill us? Is that what you want, Moses? You want us all to die of thirst out here in the wilderness?" The people look at Moses, the man who set them free from slavery, who led them through the Red Sea, and they just see an enemy, they are so blinded by fear and doubt and trouble that they really believe Moses is trying to kill them, Moses wants them dead.

And Moses is also at the end of his rope. He's tired. He's walked just as far as everyone else, and he's been dealing with their complaints ever

since they first left Egypt, and he's sick of it, and so he tells them to be quiet, stop complaining. He asks God, What am I do with these people, these complainers, these troublemakers? Even Moses looks at the people and sees them as his enemies – he tells God that the people are ready to stone him. The people think Moses is trying to kill them, and Moses thinks the people are trying to kill him – they're all so paralyzed by this fear that they are turning on each other, looking at each other with distrust and suspicion. Moses is afraid, he doesn't know what to do, and so he cries out to the Lord, what can I possibly do in the face of all this trouble, all this danger, all this pain?

And God answers Moses. OK Moses, here's what you're going to do. Take your staff – the same staff you used when you struck the water of the Nile, the same staff you used to part the Red Sea, the same staff that's been there every other time I've rescued my people from every other kind of trouble they've found themselves in, take your staff, strike that rock, and watch what happens. Because God promises Moses, I will stand before you on the rock. You strike the rock, but I will be there on that rock. You do your part, and I will do mine. And Moses does what he's told, he strikes the rock that God stands on, and there in the middle of the desert, a river springs out of the rock, enough water pours out to give every man, woman, child and animal as much to drink as they could possibly want. Their need is met. Their fear is calmed. The crisis comes to an end with deliverance, with abundance, with everything the people could possibly need provided for

them right in the middle of the desert. The people look at Moses and at God and they see them as their enemies, as the source of all their trouble, but God looks at the people and refuses to see them as enemies, refuses to see them as beyond saving, beyond rescue, God looks at the people and decides to stand with them, he provides them with what they need, in the midst of their trouble, God reveals his love to his people. There in the desert, at Massah and Meribah, the people argued with Moses and tested the Lord by saying, "Is the Lord here with us or not?", and God answers them, Yes, the Lord is here. God stands on the rock with them, God reveals himself to his people, God answers their question, Is the Lord here with us or not?, with YES, the Lord is here.

And they will still face trouble. They will still face dangers and trials and pain all throughout the rest of their journey through the wilderness to the promised land, but they have God's promise that he will be with them on that journey, every step of the way, that he will refuse to turn his back on his people, even when they turn their backs on him and on each other, God refuses to see his people as his enemies, God refuses to leave them alone, even for a second, so that every time they ask that question, Is the Lord here with us or not, the answer is always be the same, all the way through the desert, the answer is always the same, Yes, the Lord is here, Yes, the Lord is here.

And that has never changed. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul promises the believers that they will face trouble. They will experience

suffering, they will run into problems and trials, and yet whatever trouble they encounter, it cannot change the fact that YES, the Lord is Here, here with us, here in the midst of our trouble, in the midst of our pain, here standing on the rock, yes, the Lord is here. When we were utterly helpless, Christ came to us, Christ entered into this world, entered into the pain and the brokenness all around us to share that burden with us and carry it for us. Even though we were still his enemies, even though we were using all God's blessings to harm and destroy the world we'd been given and wound the people all around us, God refused to see us as his enemies, and instead he sent Christ Jesus to die for us while we were still in rebellion, still living in fear, still lashing out at God and at the people all around us, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Christ stood on the rock for us, he was struck down and wounded so that we could be healed, he willingly went to the cross and went through death itself so that even there, even in the face of death, we can know, YES THE LORD IS HERE, YES, The Lord is here.

And that has never changed. That can never change. Wherever we go, whatever trials we face, whatever trouble might come, The Lord is here with us. Jesus Christ is here with us. No matter how broken the world seems, we will never be alone. It is impossible for you to be alone. Every time we face trouble, every time we face pain, it is easy to doubt, to fear, to see only those challenges that seem so impossible to defeat, and it is so easy to ask that question, is the Lord here with us or not? Is the Lord here with us or not? It is easy to get stuck at Massah and Meribah, to start living only

for ourselves, turning against each other and seeing only enemies around us instead of friends. But our God has led us this far, through so many challenges, so many dangers, so many kinds of trouble, and we have his promise that he is still here with us, standing on the rock for us, he still calls us his friends, his beloved children, his treasured possession, God still chooses to pour out his blessings and love and grace on his people like water rushing from the rock, that love cannot be quenched, it cannot be stopped. And that's what we remember when we celebrate the gift of baptism. In baptism, we gather as God's people to remember who we are, to be reminded that God has claimed us with the power of the Holy Spirit, given us the name of Jesus Christ to bear, so that each and every day for the rest of our lives, we will know that God is on our side, that God will do whatever it takes to bring us back to his side and bring us into his kingdom. Here as we gather, we come to the waters of Massah and Meribah to be reminded that the Lord is here with us today and everyday, as baptized, beloved children of the God who set us free from slavery and walks with us towards the promised land, who provides us with what we need and protects us from every danger we might face. Today as you come to the water, remember your baptism, and know that wherever you go, whatever you do, whatever trials you face, you walk alongside Jesus Christ, and he will never let you go. Is the Lord here with us or not? Yes, the Lord is here. Amen.