

People on the Way

I like walking through downtown Ladysmith. It's small and pretty. It's a good size to get to know people, local businesses and shops. With just a glance at some posters, you can know what's going on around the town, and the needs and offers of the people in it. Each of you might have different favourite things to do in downtown Ladysmith, but I think there is something in common for many of us: checking our mail box at the post office. That is my favourite daily activity. Usually I see people I know there; I say hi to them and have a chat with them and with the post office workers; it's a place of fellowship for me. Because Ladysmith is a small town, and I am a new minister to this town, people already know me before I know them. When I got my hair cut the other day, a hairdresser exclaimed, "Oh! You are the minister who has a baby." I became her regular customer, and now she wants to help support our refugee family.

What I am trying to say is that I am getting involved with the people of Ladysmith. I like getting to know people. I enjoy getting to know you, and listening to your stories. The more I get to know your life journeys, the more I find not only differences but also similarities among us. The other Sunday, I asked where everyone here was born. About one-third of us were born in BC, one-third of us were born in other provinces in Canada, and one-third of us were born in other countries. We are a diverse people with different life stories. Each of us has a unique story of how we have come to settle in Ladysmith - whether it's because of family, jobs, location, friends or any other reason that brought us here. But all of us now call this town our home. Everyone here has a different story about how they have become, or want to become a follower of Christ, but we all have gathered here at this place on this morning to worship the same God, with this joyful and welcoming congregation. No matter where we are in our lives and faith, we all have concerns, whether it's about family, friends or our own health, we all know that we need help from God, we need help from one another, and we know that the world also needs our help. That's why we are here today. We might

have different life journeys, but we all learned the same lesson from our life journeys: 'we are, after all, a thirsty people, asking for living water on the way.'

We live in a rain-soaked place; the nearest cup of water is no farther than the nearest faucet. We have all experienced thirst, but few, if any, of us have ever really been in danger of dying of thirst. The Israelites of Moses' time knew thirst – they were a desert people, and they knew how thirst could kill. It was six weeks after the Exodus, after the crossing of the Red Sea. The oasis at Elim was behind them; the parched wilderness, unknown and unforgiving, was ahead. The people looking at that landscape would have been practiced at spotting signs of water, but the pitiless desert gave them no hope. They complained to Moses, "Give us water to drink." "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" The Bible says that the people in the wilderness test the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Their question shows that they are still in communication with God. You know, we can't talk to nothingness. The people of Israel are angry with Moses, and they are angry with God, but the very fact that they are asking questions – really, they're demanding attention, they're demanding *answers* and *action*, shows that they still have hope. Their feelings, emotions and suffering prove that they are still in relationship with their leader and God. They don't have water, but they do have somebody to talk to when they are in need – they even have someone they can yell at, that they can blame – and, even after all that yelling, they still receive what they need, because their relationship with God is about more than manners – it's about faith and struggle and a dependence that includes even the most basic necessities of life.

Communication is the key for both building and sustaining relationships. Notice how the journey of the people in the desert began: it started when God heard their cry, and listened to them. God says, when he calls Moses, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings." And throughout their journey, they experience the ever-present God, whether they are in an oasis or in wilderness, whether they have water or not, whether they praise God or complain to God, whether they are happy or angry. I used to blame the Israelites

in the desert; they must have had some sort of amnesia because they so easily forgot the presence of God. They experienced the liberating power of God with the Exodus, they saw and benefited from the parting of the Red Sea, and a short time later they were grumbling again! I thought that their complaint against God showed a pathetic lack of faith. But now I think differently. God hears complaining and grumbling, and acts on it. That is, I think, sometimes the starting point for God to act and the starting point for people to experience the living water from God.

God told Moses to strike the rock at Horeb with his stick, and the water quenched the thirst of the people. And then they could continue their journey. We say life is a journey. For our journeys we need water, our most basic sustenance. Where is the rock that you can strike to give you water? You don't have to go to Mount Horeb to find the rock that Moses struck. Rocks were probably everywhere in their journey, and the walking stick that Moses used was probably just a run-of-the-mill-stick. Likewise, our water-giving rocks are everywhere; they can be your family, this church or a fellowship group where you found a sense of belonging. And our sticks are what God has already given us: they can be our own gifts, our own life experiences, anything we can share, or sometimes the stick is our strong need for spiritual sustenance. Sometimes we can ask for the water nicely, and sometimes we have to make some noise, make our needs and expectations clear – whatever it takes for us to receive what we so desperately need. We don't need to modulate our tone with God; we can speak of our desperation, of our fear, of our impatience, even of our anger - God will never give up listening.

We are people on the way, journeying by stages as God commands. We find ourselves thirsty; we may even think we're facing a desert of faith, of hope, but God is always there, one with the landscape, waiting for us to call on Her, to demand Her presence, to ask Her for living water. She will not deny us, for we are Her children, beloved and undeniable.