

From threat to hope (Exodus 17:1-7)

In Exodus 17, the stone is transformed.

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I volunteer at a nearby men's prison, teaching a class that is generally about reading (poetry, short stories) and writing (whatever the inmates want), though the focus changes as the students change and bring new interests to the table. We get all types there, from first-time offenders to those committed to the life of crime, from young men embarrassed to "have been so stupid" to less young men who've been through this before to older men who aren't surprised by much, less still by what they get themselves into. Really, the more you get to know them the more you realize there are no types, just people—this one dealing with this, that one dealing with that.

One inmate in my class developed a pattern of always being the last one to leave. He'd be slow about gathering his papers and returning his pen. (No hard pens are allowed on the pods, as they can be made into weapons—literal weapons, not in the "pen is mightier than the sword" sense.) He'd make it so he was last to shuffle out into the hallway, where he'd be patted down by a corrections officer. "Thanks," he'd always say to me, and then maybe offer a follow-up question, Columbo-style: "Oh, one more thing..." He was in rough shape—bad teeth, bad tattoos. But over these few weeks he seemed to be softening.

One week, though, he came into the classroom hard and sharp as I'd ever seen him. He had a litany at the ready, about how this whole thing was messed up. The cops who got him were crooked. The lawyer who represented him was a jerk. The

sentence he got was unfair. For what it's worth, there's perhaps some truth to what he was saying, but it's just as likely he got the treatment anyone doing what he'd done would have gotten.

"What are you gonna do about it?" I asked.

"What can I do?" he asked.

"You're smart, curious. Get your GED while you're here, if you need it. Take the college classes as soon as you can. (Williams College, a short drive away, offers courses here.) Be ready when you get out for community college. Go to law school. You're still young."

He dismissed all this with a scoff.

"People do it, you know," I said. "And what else are you gonna do with your time? Watch Dr. Phil?"

People *do* do this. (People also watch a lot of daytime TV.) One step at a time—one math problem, one short story, one course—people can participate in a transformation that, slowly, daily, can amount to something miraculous.

One detail I'm always drawn to in this story of the time of the people in the wilderness is the transformation of the stone from being the thing of greatest threat to being a thing of surprising promise.

Moses, having led the people out of Egypt, now finds they feel not much better off. They fear for their lives—hungry, thirsty. They are becoming the menace such a state can make people become. They are giving Moses cause to fear for his life. Surrounded by loose stones in the wilderness, Moses begins to see these as something that could be weaponized. "They are almost ready to stone me!" he cries out to the Lord. An ancient recourse, a reliable mode for offing the perceived source of the problem and releasing all your frustration and fear and rage, stoning lay like a lethal if dormant option at the foundation of every wild risk.

How astonishing, then, that the Lord chooses a stone as the source for a surprising wellspring—the rock of Horeb. "Strike the rock," the Lord says to Moses, "and water will come out of it." The worst threat becomes a wellspring of promise.

But this seems to be the Lord's mode, which we'll see in the cross on Easter morning, just a few weeks away. The cross stands as a reminder of the worst the world can do and yet also of what the Lord can use, transformed, to save.

This is no excuse for resting easy amid a world littered with stones for stoning, crosses for crucifying, or prisons for filling up with people whom we otherwise don't know what to do with or about. But it can be cause for joining in this ongoing work of God in the world, which is to transform threat to hope and menace to new possibility.

Because what else are you going to do with your time?