

September 27, Ordinary 26A (Exodus 17:1–7; Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16)

God's people are in the desert by design, and the desert is, by design, dry.

by [JoAnn A. Post](#) in the [September 2026](#) issue

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In college, my older daughter performed in *Urinetown*, a Tony-winning, surprisingly prescient musical about water. More specifically, the lack of water. Set in a dystopian future with a severe water shortage, the plot follows an uprising against a corrupt corporation that controls public restrooms. Consumption of liquids is carefully monitored and tested—too much use of the public facilities might indicate illicit water use. Even tea bag use is surveilled. Musical highlights include “It’s a Privilege to Pee” and “I See a River.” Satirical in tone but damning in its implications, *Urinetown* sets the weaponization of water to music. But not everyone is singing.

Climatologists posit that within the not-too-distant future, the safest place to live in the United States will be the northern Midwest. The reason is water—fresh water. The Great Lakes, to be more specific. As the planet grows ever warmer and storms more volatile, access to abundant, fresh inland water will be limited and valuable.

We tend to take water for granted. We just open the tap and, voila! But in much of the world, water is already an endangered commodity. Water has already been weaponized, used to control and punish enemies.

The scarcity of water plays prominently in our faith ancestors’ circumstances as well. In Exodus 17, God’s people are only days out of slavery in Egypt, traveling through the mountainous region of the Sinai Peninsula. And there is no water. It’s not that water has been hoarded by some, or that the water has been contaminated by toxic chemicals, or that reservoirs have dried up, or that Moses has been disingenuous. They are in the desert by design, and the desert is, by design, dry. For some reason, God directed them down a desert road, directly into drought and danger.

It has always mystified me that, long before the chosen people do anything to demonstrate that they are unworthy of God’s kindness, God punishes them by setting them on a collision course with malnutrition, dehydration, and death. It might seem reasonable if, later in the journey, God decided to turn a one-week jaunt into a 40-year slog just for spite. But at this early point in their wilderness wanderings, only days out, the people have been only mildly irritating, demanding sweet water at Marah and nourishing food in the wilderness of Sin. They have done nothing egregious enough to move God to death-dealing retribution.

That’s why I don’t understand why, after crossing the sea on dry land, God puts them on the hardest possible path. Rather than routing them immediately toward the promised land on well-traveled routes north of the Sinai—a distance of about 275 miles—God tells them to take a hard right and go south, toward the wilderness of Sin. Surely God knows there is no water in that land. God created that land, intentionally arid and isolated.

Of course, the people would not protest. They have no way to know where they are going. They can’t know if there is a faster route, a safer route, a wetter route. The chosen people have never seen a map of the Sinai Peninsula. They cannot know that their path leads not directly to promise but immediately toward pain.

Haven't God's people suffered enough, enslaved under Pharaoh for generations? They have already known hunger and thirst, fear and isolation. The so-called promised land, as viewed from the wilderness of Sin, must seem not so different from the cursed land they have so recently fled. No wonder they challenge Moses: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" I have tremendous sympathy for the peoples' plight. It is no wonder they beg for water; they surely will die without it.

After the people attack Moses, first verbally and then with threats of physical assault, God intervenes in a miraculous way. As before and since, God demonstrates both creative power and extraordinary compassion. But there was an easier way.

Psalm 78 remembered this incident differently. Rather than God testing the people's endurance by withholding water, the psalmist reports the event joyfully: "God split rocks open in the wilderness! God made streams come out of the rock! God caused water to flow like rivers!" This is, in fact, what happens in Exodus—but not before the people bring their precarious, parched circumstance to God's attention.

Water, and the lack of it, figures prominently in our shared history. God saves Noah and his family from the great flood. God divides the waters of the Red Sea. God sweetens the brackish waters of Marah. God causes water to spring from a rock at Massah and Meribah.

As our generation hurtles ever closer to climate disaster and worldwide water shortages, will God intervene for us in such miraculous fashion?