



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE
THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 21A, SEPTEMBER 27, 2020
EXODUS 17:1-7; PSALM 78:1-4, 12-16; MATTHEW 21:23-32

IS GOD AMONG US, OR NOT?

Exodus 17:1-7 [From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"]

Is God among us, or not? That's as high stakes as any question can be. Is God among us, or are we stumbling through this fearful wilderness all on our own?

In the first reading today and last week, we hear the Israelites angrily confront Moses as they make their way through the desert wilderness. They are only two months into their exodus out of Egyptian slavery and three times they face a crisis of survival.

Each time, they interpret their dire circumstances as abandonment by God and failure by Moses.

And each time, Moses calls to God for help and God provides. Brackish water becomes clean. Manna and quail rain from the sky. The people have everything they need. But they still don't trust Moses or God.

In today's story, they journey to a new camp at Rephidim where again they have no

water. The Israelites are panicked and furious with Moses, challenging him to fix the situation or else. And Moses is afraid -- he and his brother Aaron are a two-man leadership team, with no back-up, while their followers include 600,000 men plus at least an equal number of women and children.

Moses is surely in a tough spot, but it's the Israelites I really feel for. Their world is turned upside down and it seems they've traded one set of crushing problems for another. In the fertile, wet land of Egypt, they endured forced labor but had enough to eat and drink. Now, after surviving ten plagues and their harrowing journey through the Red Sea, they are free. But what good is that if they die from thirst in the desert?

They are disoriented and weary, with no idea how long they will be in the wilderness and no idea what life might look like on the other side. They do not understand yet that it is God's steadfast mercy that has carried them day after day.

"Is God among us, or not?" They shout at Moses.

So once again, Moses cries to God, "What should I do?" And again, God provides. The rocks of the desert produce a gushing stream that is enough to satisfy every person and animal in their company. Their daily needs

are met and they keep moving through the desert.

The book of Exodus tells the sacred Jewish story of how a disorganized group of beleaguered ex-slaves becomes a tight-knit community that embraces its identity as God's people and takes responsibility for its covenant relationship with God. It takes forty bumpy years for this transformation to occur, but by the time the Israelites are ready to cross the Jordan River, they are firmly rooted in their spiritual practices, they have raised up leaders to share governance and teaching, and they have a healthy, joyful existence that sustains them even in the wilderness.

They trust that, with God's help, they – or their grandchildren, or even later descendants – will someday reach the promised land.

When I read through Exodus this week, including the story of the 10 plagues that were meant to wake the Egyptian pharaoh up to all the ways his kingdom has gone wrong, I thought, "That sounds familiar." We have not had rivers turn to blood or frogs and gnats and locusts rain from the sky, but many lives have been damaged by this year's plagues of virus and deadly racism and economic distress and civic divisiveness and extreme weather from climate change. And – as always, those who suffer the most are already the most vulnerable. Like

Pharaoh, we must wake up, too, and address the wrongs in our nation.

Through all of the challenges of the past seven months, this community has worked hard to stay connected, caring, and active. And -- as we've turned to fall, with rancor and anxiety turned up around elections, adjustment to school and work, and the dawning reality of socially distanced holidays, I am hearing more about a real weariness and disorientation for many. Like the newly freed Israelites, we do not know how long we will be in this wilderness and no idea what life will look like on the other side.

"Is God among us, or not?"

We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God because God is the medium in which we live and move and have our being. But still, we long to know and feel God's presence in a visceral and immediate way. We long for it. Perhaps the question for us right now is, "How do we re-ground ourselves so that whatever the coming months bring, we trust God's love and mercy and embody Christ in this hurting world?"

As I've pondered this question the last several weeks, the words that come to mind repeatedly are, "With God's help." I am reminded that any desire to draw closer to God is a response to God's desire for

relationship in the first place. God's grace is already at work.

I've made five resolutions that I believe are essential to show up with calmness, compassion, and hope in this time of uncertainty and in the months ahead. I share them with you as invitations for your own life and also to hold myself accountable. None are surprising or even new ideas, but that's why intention matters.

1. First, prioritize your spiritual life. Recommit to daily prayer and other spiritual practices that keep you immersed in scripture and the wisdom of spiritual teachers. It could just be 10 minutes a day, but it is holy ballast in unstable times.
2. Second, care for your body. Get good rest and nourishment. Make time every day to walk or go outside. Honor your creative impulses. Laugh.
3. Third, connect with family, neighbors, and people you love in real time. Not just by email or text. Make a phone call or video chat. Go on a socially distanced walk. Share what is happening in your own lives today, not what the news is covering. Resolve to stay connected despite differences.
4. Fourth, carefully contain consumption of news and social media. Find a balance of sources and

skip the prognostication and opinion for a while. Set a time limit – 30 minutes or one hour a day, perhaps.¹

5. Finally, practice gratitude. Not just with feelings and words, but with actions. Write notes. Send financial support to people and organizations doing good work. Volunteer.

The story of our lives in community is the story of how we embrace our identity as God's own and take up our responsibility to care for each other and all of creation. Like the Israelites, we can envision and live a sustainable, rich existence even in the wilderness.

God is among us! Amen.

¹ I appreciate Richard Rohr's discussion of this.

<https://mysticism-spirituality-circle.com/guidance-from-fr-richard-rohr/>



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