

“IS THE LORD AMONG US OR NOT?”

a sermon on Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:5-24
March 19, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
Sumner, Mississippi

“Is the LORD Among Us or Not?” It seems like an innocent enough question. Actually, it seems *important*. “Is the LORD Among Us or Not?” Who wouldn’t want to have that assurance – particularly in a time of difficulty? And for that matter, who hasn’t personally *asked* that question at some point in life – some time when God seemed particularly *distant*?

“Is the LORD Among Us or Not?” Confronted by the harsh realities of desert life, it became a burning question for the children of Israel after they departed from Egypt. “Is the LORD Among Us or Not?” Has Moses led us out of bondage (where at *least* we had food and water!) only to die out here in the heat?

“Is the LORD Among Us or Not?” When Moses finally struck the rock and water came forth, it says that he named that place “Massah” and “Meribah” – Hebrew words meaning “proof” and “contention,” meant to remind the people of their *faultfinding*.

Now, if this story were told strictly on its own, we might be tempted to side with the people on this one, over their frustrated leader, Moses. Certainly, we are “predisposed” to identify with the question itself. I mean, it wouldn’t take too many hours in the desert heat without water to make *me* begin to ask questions about why exactly I was there!

“Is the LORD Among Us or Not?” It actually seems like a pretty reasonable question, *especially* if we take it mean that they were questioning whether being out there in the heat, without water to drink, was *really* what God wanted them to be doing. Under the circumstances, it seems reasonable. Except that there are a few more circumstances.

In the first place, this wasn’t the first time, as the old account reads, that the children of Israel had “murmured” against Moses. It wasn’t even the first time that their murmuring was over a lack of water. And in the other case, just as He will in the present one, in good time, the LORD provided for them. He had *also* provided manna for them to eat – *every single day*, not to mention their amazing and miraculous escape from Egypt in the first place.

And so by the time the part of the story we are considering this morning rolls around in the saga of the Exodus, Moses has about *had* it with the people – who in his mind at *this* point were just being contentious faultfinders.

A first and most obvious point, then, concerns the people of Israel’s habitual lack of *trust*. Trust is an interesting phenomenon. It doesn’t come very *naturally* to us humans, in our present state of existence. Psychologists tell us that from our earliest days we are “learning” about it – figuring out who we *can* trust and who we *cannot* – by *experience*. If all goes well, we develop a “healthy sense of trust” in our human infancy. If we *don’t* receive adequate and reliable care from our parents or caregivers, however, we may develop an underlying sense of *dis-trust* that can paralyze us later in life.

Specifically, lack of trust breeds an unhealthy *independence* – a sense that we must always be in complete control of our own situations . . . because the only person we can ever *really* count on is our *self*.

“Trust” can be complicated. At least, it can *become* complicated – particularly if it isn’t our “early life experience.”

And so the Israelites murmured in the desert. *Regularly*. Were they going to have to take things into their own hands? Could *Moses* be trusted? Could *God* be trusted?

And what the Israelites had to learn, out there in the wilderness, was something called “interdependence,” which is one of the most fundamental qualities of living in “community.” Generations of Israelites had been living as slaves in Egypt, and unfortunately, it seems that life as Pharaoh’s slaves had taken away from the Israelites their sense of connection to their communal life and well-being – and each member’s *responsibilities* as part of that community. In the wilderness, beginning as it were from scratch, it seems that God had to teach them . . . beginning with the most basic of lessons, regarding their most basic needs – food, and water.

And that, I would contend, is why God was so “patient” with the Israelites out there in the desert – why He *provided* manna, and water, and other necessities, at times even over Moses’ objections and complaints. But that is also why God *eventually* stopped sending manna from the sky and water from the rocks, and instead gave them their “land of promise.” When they finally reached their goal, God would still provide, but they, too, would have to be faithful – physically, in caring for the land, planting and harvesting, etc., and also spiritually, in offering

sacrifices and worshiping as they had been taught. They would each have responsibilities – some simple, some more daunting – by means of which they would be able to grow and prosper in faithfulness and service.

So, I would argue, does Jesus seem to be arguing that in his day, God *accepted* the worship of both the Israelites (in Jerusalem) and the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritan's temple was located, at least *until* the time when they were prepared to learn more about *real* worship – which is in “spirit and truth,” not limited to one physical place or another.

Faith is a journey. And the Scriptures trace out various *steps* on that journey that by analogy we can apply to own lives. Faith and trust come one step at a time – from infancy onward – for *all* of us!

And that is actually another part of the answer to the Israelites' question. “Is the LORD Among Us or Not?” *Their* answer, even in Jesus' day, was that if they were gathered together in the right *place* – in the Tabernacle, or the Temple, then yes, indeed, the LORD was there.

But Jesus said, “the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Place is not the deciding factor for God's presence in the Christian era. *Attitude* is the deciding factor. It is not *that* we gather, but *how* we gather. And that puts some of the responsibility on *us*. “Is the LORD Among Us or Not?” Well, when it comes to our worship, the answer is found in our exploration of the question implied by Jesus' words to the woman at the well: “are we worshipping *spiritually* and *truthfully*?”

Only as we strive to answer *that* question with a resounding “yes” will we come to discover the LORD's presence in our midst.

The matter of trust is undoubtedly why the story of the Israelites in the wilderness is recommended for consideration in the season of Lent. We need to reflect on their experiences during that journey from captivity to freedom and consider its relation to *our* journeys – our individual . . . but *also* our *communal* faith journeys, during which we are called to live ever more faithful and committed lives – becoming more “interconnected” with God and with each other, and bearing, over time, increasing responsibility for our actions as the journey continues.

“Is the LORD among us or not?” We may be asking that question these days at any number of levels – personally, congregationally, *nationally*, or even globally. But God’s answer is the same. I have *always* been with you – in good times and in bad. Of *course* I am with you, and will lead you through whatever circumstances you are experiencing – full of compassion and mercy.

But, *worship* me in Spirit and in Truth. *Trust* me. Although God in this morning’s reading in Exodus sides with the people, Moses’ words and conclusions are still instructive – and in fact, are more in keeping with *God’s* statements about the Israelites on many other occasions in their history. Moses takes their constant “faultfinding” as proof that they aren’t yet ready to move ahead and begin possessing what God had promised.

It was almost as if the Israelites in the wilderness were “lying in wait,” looking for any possible event that might demonstrate or prove God’s *absence* and give them cause for concern. And that attitude *crippled* them, because it diverted their attention from the lessons God was attempting to teach them, the vision that God – through Moses – was working to bring into reality, the community was seeking to build.

And I think that in settings from national politics to family life – and yes, right here in the Church, we engage in far too much faultfinding – with (using national politics as an example) each “side of the aisle” only too happy to blame the other side for everything that is wrong with the world, and our country, instead of seeking to find a better way forward. . . together. If fault is what we seek, fault we will find. But what we *won’t* find in faultfinding, is God. It is as simple as that.

Back in the text in Exodus, it is Moses who is frustrated by the people’s faultfinding. I love God’s response to Moses. God simply says, Moses, “strike the rock.”

They didn’t *deserve* it. God should have let them go thirsty. And *Moses*, it seems, wanted to teach them a lesson about their murmuring. But God just said, “strike the rock.” And he did, and water came forth.

“Is the LORD among us or not?” It is a Lenten question for self-reflection – a question to read into the New Testament conversations about worshiping God in Spirit and in Trust. But hear *God’s answer* to the question plainly. God’s answer is, “strike the rock.”

But for relatively brief periods in Christian history, Christian churches have always faced adversities – times of decline, attacks from outside, controversies

within. God has *always* been faithful to His followers, and so we have no reason whatsoever not to place our full confidence and *trust* in God's ongoing care and keeping. Just *strike the rock*, and God's faithfulness will come pouring forth – in the form that God chooses, to the Glory of His name.

And to God alone be the glory. Amen.