

**“Is the Lord Among Us or Not?” • Exodus 17:1-7**  
**Sheth LaRue • March 15, 2020**  
**First Presbyterian Church Llano**

---

Exodus 17:1-7, NRSV:

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?”

I invite you this morning to join me in the way-back machine and recall the time of Moses in the book of Exodus. We all know the story - you probably learned it like I did, by watching the Charlton Heston movie “The Ten Commandments”. After hundreds of years of slavery, oppression, and abuse from the hands of the Egyptians, the Israelites have managed to escape. After many years, and with the help of God and the leadership of Moses, the Israelites are able to walk out of Egypt, cross the Red Sea on dry land, and then flee into the Sinai wilderness. It is there that they are finally able to breathe and experience freedom.

And the complaining begins immediately. It’s hot. My feet hurt. We’re hungry. The Israelites sound like middle school teenagers at an amusement park. They’ve been at it for roughly two months and they’re ready to throw in the towel: “We’d have been better off back in Egypt!” they say. God, out of an abundance of generosity, provides quail and manna for the Israelites to ease their rumbling bellies. And they continue on their journey, and they are satisfied.

Until they're not. The Israelites then begin to complain that they're thirsty - understandable considering they have been wandering through the dusty wilderness for months. The parched Israelites turn to Moses and demand: "Give us water! Why did you bring us out here...was it to kill us?" Again, like middle schoolers. The Israelites were not expecting this journey. They were expecting freedom...an easy journey back to the homeland...lands flowing with milk and honey and wine...but instead, they got a seemingly incompetent leader who has difficulty speaking to a God who doesn't seem to be present. It's no wonder the Israelites asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

That phrase...seems relevant this morning...doesn't it?

Businesses and manufacturing is grinding to a halt. Stock markets are tanking day after day. Oil prices are falling at a rapid pace. The rich are getting richer, and the poor remain poor. Is the Lord among us or not?

We see those experiencing homelessness struggling to find food, mental healthcare, support for acquiring documents, adequate shelters, safety from those who would exploit, embarrass, or evict. Is the Lord among us or not?

The news is flooded with panicked shoppers hoarding products that could have been shared. But a few careless people caused all the others to follow suit, and now, store shelves are left barren and there is uncertainty of when more will arrive. Is the Lord among us or not?

A mysterious virus from the other side of the world has been making its way across the globe and it seems that it's not a matter of if, but when it will affect our communities. We've been told to avoid contact with one another, to constantly wash our hands, to stay home unless leaving is absolutely necessary. We are to shelter in place, alone in the unknown. Is the Lord among us or not?

We're living in bodies that ache way too often and are susceptible to disease. We may have cancer...or arthritis...or asthma. We wish we could move like we used to...we wish we hadn't come face to face with our own mortality...shoot, we wish we could just walk up a set of stairs without hurting. Is the Lord among us or not?

We are scared. Terrified. Hungry. Lonely. We are uncertain, unsure and unable to look away. We are dirty, tired, and thirsty as we cry out from this wilderness: is the Lord among us or not?

It's a good question, isn't it? Is the Lord among us or not? We would be hard-pressed most days to be able to answer in certainty that indeed, the Lord is among us. Because it doesn't always feel like it. In these trying times and difficult days it can feel like God is just...not here...it feels like we've been abandoned...it feels a lot like we are wandering the dusty desert wilderness alone. We feel like that Samaritan woman, knowing it's going to be another long day of loneliness, fear, and uncertainty.

She makes her way down to the old well and spots a Jewish man resting nearby, taking respite from the mid-day heat. She knows how this will play out, because she's had these interactions before - not with this man, but with others like him. We can almost hear her groan and many of us know the look of disdain she must have given Jesus as he said to her, "Give me a drink."

In this passage from John we witness Jesus interacting with a Samaritan woman who also questioned the Lord's presence. This interaction, from our perspective, looks harmless and means absolutely nothing. But in Jesus' time, this meeting was a big deal. This was ground breaking. This was scandalous.

You see, Samaria was a small territory between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north, and it was occupied by the descendants of King Solomon. The outcome of Solomon's welcoming of pagan rituals and customs defiled the Jewish laws, and created separation between Samaria and Judah...it created betrayal and name-calling...it created deportation and destruction. By the time Jesus arrives in the territory, the Samaritans and Jews had fought, argued, and disagreed for nearly 500 years.

Samaria as a territory, as well as its inhabitants, was looked down upon with disdain and contempt - this was the land of the less-thans, of nobodies. Less than the Jews...less than the Gentiles...less than dirt...Samaria was "religiously, ethnically, and when you throw in a Samaritan woman, gender-ly different."<sup>1</sup> These people were abused, terrorized, and struggled to survive; they sheltered in place and lived in uncertainty of the unknown out 'there'. They were nobody, they were nothing and they cried out - just like their ancient relatives the Israelites - and just as we do this morning: is the Lord among us or not?

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery, "Going Through Samaria" Sermon, preached at Duke University Chapel, March 19, 2017. <https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/03.19.17%20Luke%20A.%20Powery%20Sermon%20-%20Going%20Through%20Samaria.pdf>

Notice where we started this morning, in verse three: “Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he *had* to go through Samaria.”

He had to go through Samaria? Jesus had other traveling options. He could have headed east, crossed the Jordan and headed north - an easier, and perhaps shorter route. But Jesus headed straight into the enemy’s territory. He went to those his people looked down upon...he went into *their* land to spend time with *them*...Jesus sat down and spoke with one of the least of the nobodies. The Lord was in the presence of this Samaritan woman. The Lord went out of his way to be among them. Indeed, the Lord was among them.

He wasn’t immediately recognized, but the Lord was there.

He wasn’t immediately seen, but the Lord was there.

He wasn’t immediately spoken about, but the Lord was there.

Though this woman may have questioned a thousand times why the Lord wasn’t present when she needed God the most, the Lord was there.

The Lord was there and the Lord is here.

The Lord is here, among us in our fears...

our worries...

our uncertainties and our unknowns.

The pundits may cry political doom. But the Lord is here.

The newscasters may shout chaos and mayhem. But the Lord is here.

The lines may be long and the shelves may be empty

as other customers cry ‘scarcity’ and ‘fear’. But the Lord is here.

The Lord is here in Llano, Texas

and in New Rochelle, New York

and in Italy and in China and in all of Asia.

The Lord is with us when we are in our dusty wilderness.

The Lord is with us when we feel abandoned.

The Lord is with us when it just doesn’t feel like it.

The Lord is with us!

And the Lord is with you.

When you ache,  
when you worry,  
when you are afraid - the Lord is there.

When you feel less than,  
when you feel rejected,  
when you feel ashamed - the Lord is there.

When you struggle and when you succeed...  
when you can and when you can't...  
when you laugh and cry and hug and dance...  
the Lord is there.

When we're in the deserts of life or living in the Promised Land,  
the Lord is there with us.

We are not abandoned,  
we are not rejected,  
we are not turned away.

God will wait for us, will recognize us, will provide for us  
the quail and the manna and the water we need for today,  
and God will give us the hope we need for tomorrow.

And that is good news. Amen.