

MESSAGE: “Is the Lord with Us or Not?”

Text: Exodus 17:1-7

Liturgist Text: Philippians 2:1-13

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to encourage trust in God even when (especially when) circumstances feel desperate.

A few years ago, in a reflective spirit, I wrote a paragraph that speaks to the heart of our theme. I called it, “A Meditation from the Woods.” Please close your eyes for a moment and reflect with me:

“Lord, remember when we met in the woods? At first, I entered without thought of purpose or destination. Sticks and pine needles cracked beneath my feet and the fresh scent of rain-washed moss filled the air. I came to a grove of birches and watched the lingering rays of sunset peek through their leafy canopy. A cool breeze lifted a leaf from its anchored branch and carried it down to me. Dark was coming and I knew I should be getting home. I heard the call of a whippoorwill and peepers off in the distance. And further still, the tumbling rush of water in a forest stream. I saw a burdened chipmunk darting here and there, gathering provisions for an unseen winter. I smiled at what I saw and felt a part of it. Too often, my world is filled with chipmunk busy-ness and burdens of worry. I know that night and winter are coming and I become anxious. But then I hear the call of a whippoorwill, and in the sanctuary of my heart, I am with you again.”

All of us have moments, days, sometimes even weeks at a time, of uncertainty, anxiety and worry. We cast about in search of something or someone to blame, hoping we can hold it or them accountable for the trouble provoked. It’s the fault of our spouse, our parents, our boss, our pastor, our doctor, our governor or president. Maybe it’s the fault of the System (whatever that is). Maybe it’s the fault of God. Sometimes we blame the very ones who are most able to help. If we could rise above to regain perspective, we would quickly see that God has never deserted us and will not do so now. But in the moment of crisis, all we can think about is how thirsty we are, with nothing to drink. “Is the Lord with us or not?” we demand.

The Israelites of Exodus 17 asked that same question. For four hundred years, they lived in Egypt as an immigrant community. They multiplied, and because they grew to so many, the Egyptians feared them. Determined to keep the upper hand, Pharaoh forced the Hebrews into hard labor, slavery to be candid. God heard the people’s cries of lament and prayer and sent Moses to deliver them from Pharaoh’s hand. Through a succession of miracle-plagues, the Israelites were emancipated. Moses led them to the Sea of Reeds, with an Egyptian army in hot pursuit, and God delivered them through the waters by miraculous intervention.

Deeper into the Exodus, the people complained of thirst and hunger. God provided water, quail and manna. Having received grace upon grace from the hand of God, you might think the Israelites would be content, but in Exodus 17, the assembly arrives at Rephidim and immediately begins complaining once more about lack of water. Desperate in thirst and fear, they blame Moses and accuse him of plotting mass genocide, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?”

Like his people, Moses is also desperate; but he turns to God, “What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me.” Moses, too, is thirsty, uncertain of the road ahead, fearful of the coming trials, anxious for those who are so obviously dehydrated. But he prays to God for help, and God reveals to him the next step: “Go on ahead of the people, and take some leaders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd’s rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go to the rock of Horeb. Hit the rock, and water will flow. Then the people will be able to drink.” Moses did as instructed, and the people drank, receiving an answer to their question, “Is the Lord with us or not?”

Our world is in a state of Rephidim-complaint today: residents of Puerto Rico desperate for potable water, fuel, medical care and the ability to contact loved ones stateside, residents of Guam, Japan and the Koreas, fearful of nuclear intention or miscalculation, residents of the Caribbean, Florida and the Houston area of Texas assessing damages of wind and flood, Rohingya refugees of Myanmar risking their lives to sail to Bangladesh, Mexicans sorting through the rubble of districts destroyed by earthquake, millions from South Sudan, Yemen, Somalia and Nigeria in desperate need of food and medical intervention. In every language and multiple faith expression, the equivalent words of complaint may be heard, “Is the Lord with us or not?”

Our lives, too, may be in a state of Rephidim-complaint: medical treatment plans that may not be managing our pain or prognosis, unresolved grief over loved ones no longer with us, financial struggle with no end in sight, complicated relationships shattered by misunderstanding or miscommunication. We, too, may be asking, “Is the Lord with us or not?”

Here’s the thing. God never left the building. God never said, “You’re on your own from now on. Make the best of it.” In truth, God said, “As long as the earth remains, there will be springtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night.” (Gen. 8:22) And again, “Be sure of this: I am with you always to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20) God may not reveal the future, but God will give the next step to all who ask. The question isn’t, “Is the Lord with us or not,” but rather, “Will we trust God?”

Too often, our world is filled with chipmunk busy-ness, fear, and burdens of worry. We know that winter is coming and we become anxious. But then we hear the footstep of a friend, or the call of a whippoorwill, and in the sanctuary of heart, we are once again with God.