

WITH US

Is the Lord among us or not? This question is central to our reading from Exodus this morning and not just for the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness but for us as well as it gives voice to our deepest fears. *Is the Lord among us or not?*

The story we just heard isn't the first time the Israelites have raised a concern since being rescued from the Egyptians. It's actually the third round of complaining since they entered the wilderness and the second time that water is specifically the issue. They had only been in the wilderness for three days when they arrived at Marah and found the water there undrinkable on account of its bitterness. The people complain to Moses and he in turn "cries out" to God and God provides a solution: God shows Moses a piece of wood and when Moses throws the piece of wood into the water and the water becomes sweet and drinkable. A month and a half into their wilderness journey the complaining begins again since the people are struggling to find food. This leads to God providing meat (quails) and bread (manna). And then we get to this morning's reading and once again the Israelites are without water and the people not only complain they "quarrel" with Moses. And again God provides, this time instructing Moses to use his staff – the same staff he used to part the sea – and to strike a rock, and water will come out of it – which it does.

Of these three accounts of want in the wilderness the story of the manna gets the fullest treatment. You will recall the gift of the manna came with some stipulations: the people are only to gather what they need for the day (that is, they are not to store up extra) and on the sixth day there will be twice as much so that no gathering need take place the next day – the Sabbath. Really not all that complicated, but, of course, some folks just can't seem to go along with the program. Some tried to store up some extra manna but by the next day it was full of worms and no edible. Some tried to gather manna on the Sabbath – but there wasn't any to gather. Eventually, they figured it out and God sustained them with manna in the wilderness for forty years, until they left the wilderness and entered Canaan. Behind all three of these stories of want in the wilderness is the question of "Is the Lord among us or not?" In the wilderness where life is at risk can we trust that God will provide?

One scriptural interpreter has noted:

This story of the manna is not for all of life. It is for life in those zones of bereftness when the problem is not self-sufficiency but despair, need, and anxiety. From the first to the last, wilderness is subject to God's ongoing providential generosity. (NIB)

That pretty well sums up our present times for me. "Bereft" has its origins in "bereave." What I continue to hear from parishioners and even clergy colleagues is a sense of bereavement in this moment. There is a profound sense of loss: loss of togetherness, companionship, fellowship; loss of the ways we used to do things – together; loss of routine; loss of control.

And yet I also hear us telling stories of where we have surprisingly discovered "God's ... providential generosity" and amazing grace: manna and water to feed the soul in things as unexpected as worship via Facebook Live, the call from a friend at just right the moment, the supportive email or note in the mail, the solitary flower that grabs our attention, the tune or song that pops into our head just when we needed it, the unexpected intimacy in a Zoom connection; moments when we can be reminded of the myriad ways God has made Godself known to people over the eons: the rainbow sign, the burning bush, the still, small voice, out of the whirlwind, by way of a dove, in the words of prophets and poets, in the person of Jesus.

I am reminded of God's immanence – God with us in this moment. And yet, I am also mindful of God's transcendence. In the wilderness stories, Israel experiences God in both fashions: as above, removed, totally other than humankind and as present in the messiest parts of human existence in things as mundane and essential as food and water. God is both above the fray, in charge, shaping the moral arc as well as the teleological arc – drawing us nearer and nearer to the future God intends. God is also as close to us as breathing, getting God's hands dirty, involved in the most intimate aspects of our humanness. In this moment, let us be mindful of both of these aspects of God. God's transcendence in the knowledge that God is ultimately in charge, regardless of who is placed on the Supreme Court, controls Congress or is elected President. And God's immanence – God's "with-ness" with us in each and every moment.

This past week our Association's General Minister Nayiri Karjian shared a reflection about perception by way of the story of the birth Rachel's final son. Nayiri writes:

Rachel was having a difficult labor. She was about to give birth to her second child for whom she had begged and pleaded with God. As she felt death near her, Rachel named her son, *Benoni*, meaning – *son of my sorrow*. When Jacob received the news of Rachel's death he wept, yet as he looked at his newborn child Jacob saw blessing and named him *Benjamin*, meaning – *child of blessing (of the right hand)*.

It was the custom of the time that parents named their children according to their experiences of the birth and the child. Sarah laughed when she conceived at the age of 90 so she named her son Isaac, meaning *he laughs*. Jacob grabbed the heel of his twin brother Esau, hence was named *the one who takes by the heel*.

We understand why Rachel named her son Benoni. She was in labor pains, dying. We also understand why Jacob who held the newborn saw *blessing*. Stretching the story a bit I reflect on "perception." I am intrigued that we humans can live through the same experience, the same moment, the same encounter, yet name them differently.

I wonder how we will name this period of time we are living through both, now – in this moment - , and when we look back on it once we are past the pandemic? Will be able to see as Nayiri puts it, "the blessing in the sorrow, the opportunity in the trauma?" Will we see God among us? Will we see the wasteland giving way to a life-giving stream? How we answer these questions, how we perceive our world now and later ,will be significantly impacted by our ability to trust God even in the midst of our deepest fears.

Fear - fear leads to not trusting God; to seeing former bad situations as better than the present. "Why can't we just go back to the fleshpots in Egypt?" "Why can't we just get back to the old normal?" Fear also leads to falling back on our own efforts; that somehow our survival in this moment is all up to us. I don't know about you but I've tried that approach and it's a one way ticket to feeling overwhelmed. There have been times recently when I've just had to push back my chair and stop. Stop trying to solve every problem that comes my way. Stop trying to please everyone – which is *really* hard when your natural inclination is to be a people pleaser! Stop trying to use activity to distract me from what is really worrying me. Letting go of whatever fears I have in the moment and entrusting them to God's hands.

For fear leads to anxiety, to further separation from others and God, to despair, to hopelessness. Fear leads to disempowerment, leads to being frozen, incapacitated, and paralyzed. Conversely, it can also lead to frenetic activity. In few moments, we will sing a song from *The New Century Hymnal* that speaks directly to our deepest fear: God's apparent absence. And yet the song ends with hope:

"Turn again as you hear my plea;
Tend the torment in all I see:
Loving and healing, loving and healing,
set me free. Set me free."

Is the Lord among us or not? It's really not an open ended question for the answer has been, is, and will always be: Yes. Yes, through wilderness to Promised Land; Yes, from crucifixion to resurrection; Yes, through despair to hope; Yes, from death to life; yes, yes, yes! a thousand times yes – loving and healing – setting us free from our fears to trust in God's presence with us in each and every moment as well as the ultimate destiny for all humankind.

AMEN.