

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Is the Lord Really with Us or Not?

Sermon Reflection Notes

Lent is often a time when we give something up. In theory, we replace whatever we are giving up for time with God which often includes asking questions like "Am I going to be okay?" The sermon title this week reflects this reoccurring question, one that major Biblical characters ask repeatedly: Is the Lord really with us or not? It takes different forms and comes at different times, but it is a question that keeps appearing. God does something big and miraculous, and then a little while later we ask again, "Hey, are You there?"

This cycle can be clearly seen in the book of Exodus which contains lots of struggle and lots of questioning. God, partnering with Moses, leads the people out of slavery in Egypt. God guides them by day through a cloud and by night through a pillar of fire. We know the story, particularly the scene about the parting of the Red Sea. Rev. Blacksher brought our attention to the waiting period though; God told Moses how to part the waters and lead the Israelites to safety. Moses told the people the plan. And it still took them all day and all night before they finally moved. In fact, it took one person, Nashon, to be brave enough to step into the water and then to keep going until he was up to his nose. Everyone was watching, everyone was probably wondering what in the world he was doing. Then the Red Sea parted.

By the time we get to Exodus 17:1-7, however, the relationship between God and Israel is precarious. Israel's life in the wilderness after liberation and before promised land is not easy. There is no water to drink. "They could not produce any for themselves. There were no wells. They had no adequate substitutes for water that could possibly sustain them. The focus is upon their deep need and upon the way in which the deepest question of faith is connected to the deepest material reality of life. So they complained, thinking they were entitled to water. They argued with Moses, who was supposed to assure the water supply. Finally they must come face-to-face with God, because they have no alternative" (*The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann* 198-199).

God is ready. God is working. We, like the Israelites, have to take the step. We have to move. God invites us into the water, often at the moment we aren't ready. Asking questions is not a lack of faith. It is not doubt. It is the initial move toward a declaration of faith, the first step. "That is what Lent is about, is it not? ... to come face-to-face with God in need because there is no alternative. Lent is not about guilt or even about repentance or giving up some convenient extra. It is rather about the raw, deepest need in our life" (*The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann* 199). It's asking the question, "Is the Lord really with us or not?" and discovering over and over again that the answer is always yes, God is right here.

Scripture

Exodus 17:1-7 (NRSVUE)

¹ 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. ² 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?"³ 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?"⁴ So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me."⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Discussion Questions

1. Who are some major Biblical characters who ask questions? What form do their questions take?
2. What situations do we face that feel like we are standing "at the water's edge" with the Israelites?
3. What stories do we tell ourselves that leave us standing "at the water's edge?"
4. What stories do we tell ourselves that move us into the water?
5. Who are people in history or in our lives who, like Nason, step first into the water? How can we be like them?
6. One thing that can keep us standing on the shore is the collective narrative that the shore is safe, the shore is where we belong. Metaphorically speaking, what "safe shores" might we need to step away from?

Closing Prayer

In this season of Lent, O God, teach us to trust you even in those times when we find ourselves in the wilderness, lost, overwhelmed, afraid. Teach us to know that you are present, even when the future we thought was secure is destroyed. Teach us to be thankful for your promised presence, and to know that you will stand before us and lead us toward the new life that only you can give. We pray in the name of the One who went to Jerusalem, the One who shows us the way. Amen.

Is the Lord among us or not?