

“Is God Among Us or Not?” – Walter Fenton

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

It is very kind of Ben to share the privilege of preaching here at St. Paul's.

But you know, I got to thinking the other day, “Are some people peeking ahead in the lectionary, finding the juicy passages, and then quietly calling Ben to see if they can preach on a given Sunday?”

I don't like thinking other people are quicker witted than me, but I'm afraid its true.

Not too long ago Dr. Hartley got to preach on the Passover story. I mean, how easy is that? Anybody can preach on the Passover.

And a few months ago, my friend John Massena, got dealt Genesis 22, the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac. What a great passage! And lo and behold, John had recently finished his masters thesis on that very passage!

The next thing you know, Dr. Dunnington will be up here preaching about Paul and Silas in prison...and their addiction problems. OK, maybe they didn't have any addiction problems, but they were in prison.

I'm musing out loud about this matter, because I felt like I jumped too quickly when, several weeks ago, Ben asked me to preach this Sunday. I said yes before looking at the lectionary passages for the morning. When I did look, I started grumbling to myself.

The Gospel lesson is one of those Jesus versus the scribes and Pharisees stories.

The Philippians passage is great, but it's all about humility—like I know anything about humility. And the Psalm, well it's just a long psalm about dark sayings and parables, and Israel's history, etc., etc.

And finally there's the Exodus passage. I mean give me a break. It's a passage about people complaining, and murmuring, and whining, because of what—they don't have any water. Cry me a river. I've got a sermon to preach here, and I've got nothing.

I'm a complainer, even a whiner. I don't like to admit it, but its just one of those vices I'm trying to rid myself of with halting success. I'm worried I'll get to heaven—I know, I shouldn't assume that I will—but I'm worried I'll get to heaven, and say something stupid like, “Gee, I really

thought the pearly gates would be bigger.” It’s an unseemly trait, especially when I don’t really have too many serious things to complain about.

Not too long ago, I heard Marlo Thomas being interviewed on an NPR program, she was talking about comedians, and how the best ones learn to laugh at themselves. She told a story about her father, Danny Thomas, who one evening got into a silly argument with his wife because he was complaining about some minor issue. He eventually became so angry that he got up from his huge mahogany dinner table, stormed over to the opulent foyer, started to head up the cascading, spiral staircase, turned back to his family, and in all seriousness, blurted out, “I can’t live like this anymore!” Marlo Thomas said there was a slight pause, and then everybody started laughing at him. And when he realized how foolish his complaining sounded in his surroundings, he started laughing at himself as well.

It’s easy for us, no matter what are circumstances in life, to complain, to grumble or murmur. I’m not sure why, but I do know I’m not alone in my whining and complaining.

This morning’s passage from Exodus is one of a number of stories about the Israelites murmuring in the wilderness. In divinity school, I remember reading a book dedicated solely to these grumbling in the wilderness stories. Oddly enough, I enjoyed that book because it tells a story of a people struggling to be faithful with God even while they are being delivered and guided by God. The overarching narrative of the story rings true. Who among us doesn’t complain and even quarrel with God—the God who is delivering us?

But truth be told, in certain situations, I think the Israelites had good reason to complain. They complain about the lack of food, the kind of food they are given, and, as in today’s passage, about the lack of water. I’m inclined to side with the Israelites on this one. It seems to me that complaining about the lack of water is not an unreasonable complaint.

But interestingly enough the story is not really about the Israelites getting water. In fact, the text never explicitly states that the Israelites actually got any water. The little vignette doesn’t end by saying something like: “So Moses struck the rock with his staff, and then and there cool, clear water gushed forth from the hard stone. The Israelites drank until their terrible thirst was sated. And then they fell down on their knees, lifted their hands and hearts to heaven, and thanked God for the water.”

No, the little story ends by telling us the etiological explanation for why the place the Israelites encamped during this encounter is called Meribah and Massah. There’s obviously some interweaving here of what were originally two stories, but that need not detain us. Meribah is simply the participial form of the Hebrew word *rib*, which means, “to contend,” and Massah is the participial form of *nsh*, which means, “to test”. And how are the Israelites contending with and testing God? Well, the text clearly tells us, by questioning his presence with them: “Is the LORD among us or not?”

“Is the LORD among us or not?” It can feel a little blasphemous even uttering that question. And there’s clearly something to thinking that is the case. We later learn that God variably holds this incident against the Israelites, against Moses and even against Aaron. Some Christian traditions have the Church read Psalm 95 several times during the Lenten season. The psalm closes, in part, this way: “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. . . . Therefore in my anger I swore, ‘they shall never enter my rest.’”

But try as we may not to ask the question, we do ask it. We were pretty sure the Lord was among us the other day, but today, we’re not so sure. In the midst of our confusion, our boredom, our sense of being unsure about things, and especially when we are suffering, or perhaps even worse, when someone we love is suffering or is lost, we cannot help asking, **“Is the LORD among us or not?”**

Fortunately, the Bible that makes us wonder whether we should be asking such a question, is the same Bible that records the Psalmist crying out, “How long, O LORD, will you hide yourself forever?” And allows us to hear Jesus cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I am thankful the canon leaves room for our honest puzzlement, for our good faith wondering about whether God is among us or not. Psalm 13 is one of my favorites along these lines. It asks no less than five questions in two verses: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?”

In the main of course, the canonical expression is, “Yes, God is among us!” “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel [God with us].” God goes before us. God is in our midst. God is among us. Or as a modern creedal confession begins, “We are not alone, we live in God’s world.”

I think the question, “Is the LORD among us or not?” inevitably leads us to an even more important question: “If the LORD is among us, how is he among us?” In one way or another, I think all of our readings this morning are contending with that question.

Psalm 78, the second longest psalm, is a recitation of God’s history with Israel. I love how that psalm begins: “I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.” The story of God among us is not always a straight story; it has to be told in “parables” and “dark sayings.” It’s not always straightforward, not always readily apparent and clear to us.

And then, even when it should be apparent God is among us, we can get a little huffy and offended like the chief priests and elders in the Gospel story. We’re so sure we know how God is supposed to be among us we start asking biting questions of God. When his presence

doesn't conform to the way we think he should be present, we wind up rejecting precisely what we've been hoping for. Like the elders and chief priests, we can become obtuse and hardened to evidence of God's presence among us because we're pretty sure we know how God *ought* to be among us.

Finally, there's the Philippians passage where Paul, while offering some words of admonition—launches into perhaps an early Christian hymn about how God is among us in Christ Jesus. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

When I read those verses, I cannot help but think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. While in prison, awaiting execution, Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend:

"The God who is with us, is the God who forsakes us.

The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God, is the God before whom we stand continually.

Before God, and with God, we live without God.

God lets himself be pushed out of the world, on to the cross.

He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.

Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.

The Bible directs us to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help."

Like the ancient Israelites, we too are sojourners passing through the wilderness. We grow weary, anxious and are troubled at times. Being a frail and fallible people, we're bound to complain, to murmur and even quarrel with God sometimes. Often times we'll do it for no good reason, but sometimes—when life gets frustrating, when we are perplexed and disappointed, when we are discouraged, when our hearts are broken, or when we lose a loved one—we will, with good reason, ask: "Is God among us or not?"

And we'll be in good company in our asking.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.