

“Is God Among Us...Or Not?”

*Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for September 20 2015 – Ordinary 25
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“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Exodus 17:1-7 (NRSV)

From the wilderness of Zin 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?”

Image: Marc Chagall, *Water from the Rock*

A long time ago, a very long time ago, a people called "Israel" left their home and native land during a time of severe famine. They made a new home for themselves as legal immigrants in a land called Egypt. They and their descendants enjoyed many years of prosperity in Egypt, until a new Pharaoh arose over Egypt who stripped them of all their rights of citizenship and enslaved them. The harder the Israelites labored, the more Pharaoh laid heavy burdens on them. They cried out to the God of their ancestors to save them from suffering, but their prayers went unanswered.

One day an Israelite named Moses, who had escaped from Egypt after killing an Egyptian slave master, was tending his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness. He came upon a bush that was burning but was not consumed. When he stopped for a closer look at this strangely burning bush, he heard a voice telling him to take off his shoes, for he was standing on holy ground. Moses heard the voice of God say to him, "I am going to send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

After voicing several objections to God, Moses reluctantly accepted his calling. He led his people, God's people, out of slavery into the wilderness. Little did he and his people that they would be spending forty years in this wilderness. They would be spending forty years between two miraculous crossings of water: the Red Sea at the beginning of their journey, and the Jordan River at the end of their journey.

Moses would be their leader throughout these forty years of their wilderness journey of transition. Moses was the first transition management leader in recorded history, and his story, and the story of his people, is also the story of congregations in transition in the twenty-first century.

There are multiple points of contact and connection between the biblical wilderness journey of the Israelites and the journey of today's congregations from the departure of their settled pastor to the arrival of their next settled pastor. Most of the time, when a pastor has left a community of faith, for example through retirement or to accept a new call, the congregation has had no choice in this decision. Regardless of the relationships individual parishioners had with their departed pastor, the congregation as a whole has entered a time of grief, anxiety, uncertainty, disorientation. The congregation is like the Israelites, standing on the threshold of the wilderness, anxious about their present situation and uncertain about what the future may hold for them.

Today's text tells of a serious problem that emerged early on in the wilderness: the lack of water, and the growing thirst of the people and their livestock. Understandably, the people complained to Moses about this dire situation. Not only did they complain to Moses: they also wondered whether God was among them or not.

With God's help, Moses provided a miracle for the thirsty people: he struck the rock with his staff, and water gushed forth from the rock, and the people and their livestock were thirsty no more. For the time being at least, the people would know that God was among them, and that Moses was their trustworthy transitional pastor.

Today's transitional pastors don't have Moses' ability to perform miracles—at least, I know *I* don't have the ability to perform miracles. At the same time, today's congregations in transition have their own concerns to deal with, and they need leadership they can trust. Moses established trust, not so much by performing miracles, but by getting to know the people: by visiting them at their family and group campsites. Which is why the first priority facing today's transitional pastors and congregations in transition is ***establishing trust***. And the most effective way to build trust is to build relationships—to spend time getting to know one another.

You and I have now spent several months getting to know one another and building trusting relationships. We've had several congregation-wide conversations about inheriting our legacy and envisioning our future. I've been continuing these conversations with many of you on an individual or family basis. Throughout these many and varied conversations, you've found it challenging to express the mission of the church in 2015 and beyond. Given the rapidly changing social and cultural landscape where we find ourselves today, this should not be surprising.

As your interim pastor, I like to think of myself as your wilderness guide. You have come to trust that I will get you through this wilderness safely; I have come to trust that you will do your part along the way. If we were backpacking together in Baxter State Park in Maine, with the goal of making it to the summit of Mount Katahdin, which I have done on numerous occasions, you would be trusting my plans for our hiking and camping together; and I would be trusting you to work together so we can achieve that common goal.

This is not to say that there are no stumbles along the way. As the biblical wilderness narrative makes clear time and again, there were multiple challenges to the stability and security of the Israelites along the way. There were multiple challenges to their faith: Is God among us...or not? The crisis of thirst was one among many. But the people were ultimately able to overcome every obstacle that confronted them in the wilderness. God was among them throughout their wandering.

When they were thirsty, Moses struck the rock and fresh water gushed forth. When they were hungry, God sent manna and quails to feed them. When they were afraid of getting lost, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night kept them on the right path. When they were uncertain about how to relate to God and one another in the wilderness, God through Moses gave them ten commandments, ten building blocks, as the foundation for their life together in community.

Imagine with me if you will the mystery and the beauty of the wilderness for our wandering ancestors. For them, a day in the wilderness begins and ends with the night in the wilderness: it begins and ends with the setting of the sun. When three stars are visible in the sky, a new day has begun. There is no ambient light, no light pollution, in the desert wilderness. The sky is filled with an infinite number of stars. The moon cycles through its phases, from new to crescent to full to crescent to new.

At night, when the harsh desert sun had set and the coolness of the night air was spreading through their wilderness campsites, the people would tell stories around their campfires: stories of their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah, Joseph in Egypt. They would tell stories that reminded them of God's presence and guidance, stories that reminded them of promise and fulfillment.

During the first two years in the wilderness, the people had no permanent home. They lived in tents. Everything that they owned was portable. Even their worship space, what the Bible calls "the tent of meeting," was portable. The tent of meeting served as a temporary sanctuary for the ark of the covenant. The tent of meeting also served as a temporary sanctuary for the worshipping community of wanderers.

After living in tents for two years, after worshipping for two years in the portable "tent of meeting," the Israelites arrived at Kadesh-Barnea, where they established their semi-permanent home, where they would spend the remaining thirty-eight years of their time in the wilderness.

If the first few months of the interim time are like the first two years of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness, then the remaining months of the interim time are like the thirty-eight years the Israelites spent in Kadesh-Barnea. The Israelites lived in a secure yet temporary home, where there was abundant water and food, where the tent of meeting was a sign of the presence of God among a people who were tasked with living into their new identity.

I hasten to add that the wilderness journey of a congregation in transition will not last for forty years. Experience has shown that eighteen months is a good amount of time for what the Bible calls a journey by stages. These stages in today's congregations go by various names. I like to think of them as: establishing trust; embracing the present; envisioning the future; preparing for new leadership; and ending well. Now that we have found a home in Kadesh-Barnea, we are tasked with envisioning the future, which has to do with discovering, and living into, a new identity.

This stage of envisioning the future is by no means an easy one. After more than 300 years of a fairly consistent identity, it can seem daunting to face the crisis—and the opportunity—to discover, and live into, a new identity. This stage of the journey took thirty-eight years for the Israelites—which suggests to me that our God is, among other things, a God of patient and persistent faithfulness.

Perhaps the question the Israelites asked at Rephidim was a kind of constant refrain for their journey of transition: Is God among us, or not? And the consistent answer to that question was: Yes, God is among us. God was among the Israelites a long time ago, a very long time ago. And when today's congregations in transition ask, "Is God among us, or not?" the consistent answer to that question is, "Yes, God is among us now, in many and varied ways, some of which may not always be obvious. Is God among us...or not? God is indeed among us, today and into the future. God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks and praise be to God! Amen.