

Is the Lord Among Us or Not?

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Scriptures:

¹From 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. ²The 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?" ³But 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?" ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The 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. ⁶I 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. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" Exodus 17:1--7 (NRSV)

Introduction and Comments:

Moses was sitting in the Hebrew ghetto, waiting for an appointment to see Pharaoh. Things were terrible. Pharaoh was being extremely difficult. The rest of the Israelites were mad at Moses for stirring things up and making the overseers even more irritable and demanding than usual. He was about ready to give up.

Suddenly a booming, sonorous voice spoke from above: "You, Moses, heed me! I have good news, and bad news." Moses was staggered. The voice continued: "You, Moses, will lead the People of Israel out of bondage. If Pharaoh refuses to release my people, I will smite Egypt with a rain of frogs." "And, if he still refuses to let my people go, I will smite Egypt with a plague of Locusts. And, if that doesn't work, I'll think up some more bad things to do."

"So, Moses, when Pharaoh lets my people go, if he tries to block your way or his army pursues you, I will part the waters of the Red Sea to open your pathway to the Promised Land."

Moses was stunned. He stammered, "That's... that's fantastic. I can't believe it! But what's the bad news?" "You, Moses, must write the Environmental Impact Statement on all that I do."

Sermon:

Given the cynicism among so many today and a world constantly on the brink of moral and physical self-destruction, I guess the question, "Is the LORD among us or not?" is very relevant.

Bible scholars tell us that the book of Exodus is a compilation of Israel's oral traditions and legends, recorded and interpreted by Judean priestly writers during the Babylonian Exile, that continued to be edited over time.

The Babylonian Exile was a time when God's faithful and beneficent presence was doubted, especially given the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and Judah's ruling elite living in exile. Let me add that Exodus is not a history of early Israel per se, but rather it is an

explanation of what the history of Israel means and an interpretation of Israel's faith¹. I point out that most Israelite faith-stories tend to be about historical or quasi-historical events that serve to remind and reassure the people that their faith in God was and is well placed because what God has done in the past, God will do in the future. So, let us understand that our scriptures this morning are coming from some hopeful Judean Israelites during times when there didn't seem to be any solutions or hope.

Poor old Moses certainly understood the expression, "damned if you do and damned if you don't." As this older guy, Moses should have been enjoying life in some Bedouin senior citizens' community with a bunch of grandkids around him; but, no, he is out stomping around in the wilderness leading a group of very intractable people into some promised land under the auspices of a god, who called himself the god of his people's ancestors. The people appear to do nothing but gripe and complain about everything - no food, no water, too much manna, but no meat, yada, yada, yada. But, not only that, God even keeps Moses living on the edge in a series of last-minute, divine rescues from impossible and dangerous situations.

In today's scriptures, the people are again complaining about a lack of water for themselves and their livestock. This complaining brings into question Moses' fitness to lead and concomitantly, the might and right of God to be their god. In short, given everything that God has done for the people up to this point, their complaining dishonors God and Moses. No wonder that faithless, dishonorable generation wandered around until they had all died off and a more faithful generation could be led into the Promised Land.

Many of us have seen the movie *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston and know how it all turns out. Although, I bet not as many have read the book as have seen the movie. Yet, some pious Christians tend to look down their noses at the ancient Israelites for their lack of faith. If God had done all those amazing and wondrous things for them and their people, we wouldn't doubt God, would we? I mean, God had delivered the people from Egyptian oppression; God had provided the people food; God had provided water in the desert as well as a constant and visible manifestation of the divine presence to guide and reassure the people in the uncertainties of the wilderness. And, now, they doubted Moses' and God's ability to provide for them, yet again. We wouldn't do that would we?

Sadly, God's people do sometimes doubt, don't we? I think some of the biggest reasons we doubt God are the things we've been taught about how God does or doesn't work or how God is supposed to do things now and in the future.

Moses, in exasperation and fear, tells God that the people are about to throw rocks at him if they don't get water soon. God tells Moses to take his rod, a symbol of his authority and God's power with him, and some of the Elders, those guardians and keepers of the collective consciousness of the people, and go out. Moses will eventually come to a rock; he will know the right rock when he sees it, and he is to whack the rock. Once more, when all seems hopeless, God through Moses delivers what seems to be the impossible. Water comes from a dry, desert rock, who would have thunk it?

After the coming of the water, old Moses just couldn't pass up the opportunity to poke the folks a little. He names the place of saving water - Massah, which means test or proof, and Meribah - struggle or contention, i.e., a place where the people put God and Moses on trial and tested God's power and presence and Moses' right to lead.

¹ Brueggeman, Walter. *The Book of Exodus, Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. Vol. X of the *New Interpreters Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1994 online, Ministry Matters.

Remember, now, the priestly writers of Exodus are recalling and recording these stories of Israel's historical lack of faith and doubt during their own desperate times. "Is the LORD among us or not?" is the question. Which is to say, is our god, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the god of the Exodus, here in Babylon with us or has our god been totally defeated and rendered impotent by the gods of the Babylonians? Therefore, why should the people be faithful to a defeated god and his commandments, rituals, or moral and ethical precepts? So, some said, let's just join the victors and worship their gods. And many of the Judean Israelites did just that.

However, after some Jew or Jews came to a world altering insight that their god was the one-and-only true God, the Creator and Sustainer of all reality, who had used the Babylonians to punish and purge God's people, they went on to build a large, faithful, and influential community in Babylon. This community would eventually produce for the Jewish world the great Babylonian Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud is a compilation of Jewish civil and ceremonial laws and legends that comprise the Mishnah and the Gemara or rabbinic commentaries. The Babylonian Talmud still informs much of Jewish thought and practices today.

Other members of the exiled Jewish elite, under a new Persian regime and their policy of repatriating exiles, were allowed to return to the holy land, establishing a Persian vassal state, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and a new Temple at Persian expense. Who would have thunk it?

It seems each generation, regardless of nation or ethnicity, has its Massah-Meribah events and issues that cause people to gather, wringing their hands, bewailing the state of affairs, and demanding God and their leaders pull rabbits out of a hat to meet people's needs, wants, and restore their comfort, security, and illusions of control. Amid the uproar, the threats and the posturing of citizens and leaders alike, time slides by, ushering in new balances, solutions, renewed prosperity, or people adjust or lose interest if things don't get any worse. All the while, the world takes one more incremental, albeit often a highly-adjusted step forward in God's purposes.

No, there was no supernatural warping of cause and effect, no messiahs on clouds, no hordes of righteous, wrathful angels championing one cause over another. There was just God, doing what God does and has done since before time and being - keeping faith with reality, God's reality, while whispering appeals to humankind, luring and urging them to be better in the next moment than they or we were in the last by obeying time-honored, self-evident, commonsense holy ways of life.

These very practical, holy ways of life, in my estimation, are a significant measure of God's abiding and faithful presence among us. But, it's always been a struggle hasn't it - trusting the divine ways of life and responding to holy whispers because we want shouts and dynamic displays of power, revenge, dominance, and instant solutions according to our measure of things. People always seem to be testing God and challenging God's emissaries, don't they?

As individuals, how many times have we found ourselves in dark, hopeless situations, complaining about God's inattentiveness only to become aware at some time later that we've come through it, whatever it was, and we've made it, and things are better or not getting worse. We may not have won the Publisher's Clearing House \$1,000 a day for life; we may not have experienced supernatural beings righting all our wrongs, but we've made it. Somehow, some way, we found the strength, the insights, the patience, or the courage to reach out for help. We endured, we overcame. However, as is often the case, the next rough patch in life may find us doubting and striving with God again, but hopefully not as bad as in previous times.

Some will say that all people adjust, adapt, compensate, and accommodate all the time; these are not divine solutions, fixes, or answers to an immediate crisis or need. Oh? These are just natural capacities of human reason and the will to thrive and survive. Oh? People adapt, compensate, and accommodate whether religious or not. Oh?

Well, I agree, and such insights are correct. It seems that God has hard wired these capacities into us and maintains the ways of life that sustain saint and sinner alike regardless of their beliefs in and about God. However, those who do not acknowledge the holy and go through adversities on their "own" do so with an acute awareness of one of the most debilitating human anxieties - aloneness, being a singularity. No matter how many people we have around us, caring for us, loving us, and we loving them, we are each still a singularity, alone in our minds with ourselves. And those people who do not acknowledge a sense of God's presence during times of adversity often come out the other side, if they come out mentally or physically intact, with a self-destructive arrogance or fatalism, both of which will diminish their divine potential for true nobility, creativity, and peace in a world they have little to no control over.

Those who believe and have faith in God's presence in their lives come through hard times and crises not only with an increased faith and trust in the divine commonsense and spiritual ways of life, but with a soul-anchoring consciousness of the Holy Other of the universe as present to them in mind and soul. That is, they experience the profound joy of knowing that they are not alone and are hopeful and confident in whatever comes next.

As one looks at the history of this nation, only a fool could not fail to see the hand of divine providence at work; saving, guiding, and abetting this nation's survival and prosperity. As we recount our own lives, our failures, successes, narrow escapes, and sinfulness, we would have to be out of touch with reality not to realize that something greater than ourselves was and is at work in our lives.

Let me add that faith is more than some abstract belief or the acceptance of a body of religious doctrines. Faith is the all-encompassing reality of our lives. Second-by-second, we trust, we have faith in the divine, physical, and moral laws of cause and effect that have favored our planet, our species, and maintains the universe as we move from one moment to another. Faith is not expecting a "miracle", God warping the laws of cause and effect for one's benefit, or some childish naiveté. Faith is trusting and living by what we know to be trustworthy, right, moral, and good that can and will bring the best results, answers to our problems, and the power of hope to our lives. Folks, if we trust in the law of gravity, then we are living by faith, and we must trust that living by faith in the workings of God's revealed will in the moral, wholesome, and healthy dimensions of life are just as much a proof of God's presence as gravity.

But, we must also be open to hearing divine whispers along the continuum of reality, which may lead us into novel applications of God's will in our lives and the life of our nation and our people. Folks, God is present as the very energy of life working in us, creature, creation, and the universe for divine purposes, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Like the stories of the ancient Israelites in their wilderness wanderings and in exile, our sense of God's presence in our life may become distorted by the intensity of our needs, our sufferings, and short-sightedness. In our wilderness moments, I believe people, Moses-es, if you will, who have responded to God's claim on their lives come into ours as helpers, healers, and guides. Their help may simply be, "Stop what you are doing, turn around, do what you know is right, stop looking for miracles". You are an intelligent person; you know what is right and good, and you have the divine power of self-determination. You have the support of family, friends, and hordes of professionals; so, just do what is right. I think the epitome of

human pride is a form of mental and spiritual pathology, wherein people think they are so unique or so bad that only God in some special interdiction can save them from themselves or others contrary to all the evidence and the natural and moral laws of cause and effect.

As a counselor, I've had folks with substance abuse problems or obsessive-compulsive disorders tell me how long and how hard they had prayed for God to take away the urges to drink, do drugs, or obsess over something. I must admit, I thought what arrogant snots to think you are so special that God would take away your God-given right and blessings of self-determination in your choices when there are hundreds of people standing ready and willing to help. It wasn't until they got in trouble and were forced to get help that they moved beyond their arrogance and pathetic understandings of God and human nature. (Well you know why I'm not a drug and alcohol counselor anymore.)

When we live by the revealed moral, ethical, healthy, and wholesome ways of life, we can strike the hardness and hopelessness of any life situation with the rod of God's promise, and we can expect life-giving, relationship-restoring, and mental and physical blessings to flow forth. If you don't believe this, you had better grab a hold of something anchored in the ground because gravity is about to stop working.

However, the process starts mentally, spiritually, and physically with doing what we know to be right and cultivating the habits of righteousness. If we don't know what is right in any given situation, then we must use our intelligence to seek and find answers, or get help from others. Folks, none of us are self-sufficient. That is a demonic myth of human pride. The best any of us can ever expect to claim is some degree of self-reliance.

The ancient Israelites asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" The answer was and is yes. The proof - look to and trust your own histories of God's deliverance because as God has delivered you in the past, God will deliver, provide, guide, and keep God's people throughout all time. You can turn lose now, gravity is still working.