

Is the Lord Among Us or Not?
Exodus 17:1-7
Philippians 2:1-11

“And being found in human form....”

Is the Lord among us or not? The question is a question asked by a people in the wilderness and so a question asked by more of us in this sanctuary than anyone would think. The wilderness is where you find yourself when you think you are nowhere. Who knows what you have left behind to arrive where you are not; who knows what you have yet to dare if ever you are to reach your destination. And now, in this moment, you doubt whether you have what it takes to go on, wonder if the ones by your side are the right ones, wonder if maybe you should have turned back long ago. Perhaps you are running on empty financially or you have reached the limit of what you bargained for when you set out with nothing more than a promise. Perhaps the nagging sense that you simply have left undone those things you ought to have done and done those things you ought not to have done all along the way (and there is no health in you, as the old confession goes), perhaps sin or fear or inadequacy has you stopped in your tracks. In any case, having reached the limit of what you can bear, the question of the Israelites becomes your own: Is the Lord is among us or not. For a moment or two, I invite you to quit your wilderness for theirs

Three days into the wilderness, three days after the parting of the sea and their escape from the Egyptian army, given their own set of uncertainties, the Israelites began to complain. They complained first about the bitter water at Marah. Moses cried to the Lord and the Lord answered. A month and a half later, when they had come to the wilderness of Sin, hunger made them wish for the fleshpots of Egypt. There the whole congregation of Israel complained. God heard and sent manna in the morning, bread from heaven, sufficient for the day.

Leaving the wilderness of Sin, we read of their coming to Rephidim where the creek had run dry. Again they quarrel with Moses; Moses intercedes; God responds; water gushes out of a rock. Having arrived at the end of what could be called the complaint narrative, Moses calls the place of their last complaint Massah and Meribah; he names the place “test” and “quarrel” because hidden in the fearful human existence of God’s people is a quarrelsome and testy question that anticipates the question hidden in our own: Is the Lord among us or not?

We ask the question, says Robert Jenson, as creatures whose inescapable existence in time finds us needing to summon “God”. In the midst of time’s wilderness, we call upon God to assure ourselves that life is more than one damned thing after another. At risk before circumstances beyond our control, we invoke God’s name to confirm that the days of our years are “a succession somehow held together, somehow embraced, somehow fit for coherence.” [Jenson] In a very real sense, to ask after God is to ask in time to see ourselves whole, from beginning to end--to be given an intimation, in this present darkness, of the person we will finally be; we cry out to know the purpose for which we will have lived and loved and suffered and died in order that we may endure. To ask after God in this way is to ask after eternity. The question erupts most often in the wilderness, when we are neither here nor there; erupts when, simultaneously, the familiar slavery of the past, and the fearful freedom of a promised future, stop us in our tracks. Short on food or water, missing a mortgage payment or a job, wondering when our body will give out or our resolve will give in, we complain to the heavens saying, “Why has life come to this?” “Who is in charge here?” Yet hidden in our complaint, our anxiety, our terror, is the abiding question: Is the Lord among us or not?

The first question begs the second: Is *what* Lord among us? What God are we, with Israel, asking after when, in extremis, we dare the name? And if, as Jenson puts it, “Eternity is

the embrace in which past and future come together in the present rather than tearing it apart,” then what eternity does our question presume?

On the one hand, the hand of popular religion, the eternity that is God, no matter the present darkness, simply assures us that we will survive ultimately; that one way or another, in one place or another, we will live forever. Jenson calls this the eternity of Persistence: “it is the *timelessness* in which past and future cohere because there is really no future.” We are already what we will be forever: branded with sins that are everlasting, weighed down with a past that cannot be changed, regrets and *misereres* notwithstanding. What has been *settles* what can come of the future and, in this way, the eternity of Persistence rules time as a God, guaranteeing our securities and assigning our guilt. “This God is the heavenly Watchmaker...the super-Bookkeeper who will let us ‘into heaven’ if we only do our best, and are sincerely sorry and try harder from now on...The average God,” Jenson says, “is eternal in this way.”

Curiously, this is the God we think we want when, in the wilderness, we ask if God is among us or not. The present has become perilous, causing us to seek refuge; time has become threatening, causing us to head for the safe haven of timelessness. In sum, this is the God whom we seek when we are afraid of the future, when we want to hold on to our given selves, no matter how broken, when we need to grasp the known as a hedge against the fearful mystery ahead. We ask after the presence of an ordinary God who is the same sort of being *we* long to be: immutable, a changeless rock, able to settle all of our uncertainties in advance, to defend the status quo, even to “provide a refuge when the status quo itself becomes too threatening....He is,” says Jens, “the Rock of Ages, the Sheltering Arms, the transcendent Security Blanket.”

No doubt this is the God the Israelites thought they were asking after when, in the wilderness, they found themselves without water or bread, wishing for the fleshpots of past

securities. They invoked God to defend them from the future. And a cursory reading might lead us to believe that this, in fact, is the God who shows up, changing bitter water to sweet, causing manna to fall from heaven, making water to spurt out of a rock. For millennia, the God of the Bible has been mistaken for a transcendent Security Blanket whom we beseech, even now, in extremis.

But listen again, for there is another sort of eternity afoot in time! The eternity that is the God who turns out to be the God of the Israelites is the God in whom “past and future [rhyme] because the future is endlessly overcoming all bondage to the past, [even overcoming]...the past itself; it is the eternity,” says Jens, “in which all things are free, [just as they are], for what they are not yet.” As *this* God is among us, the future is anything but secure. Our lives continue to elude our grasp, every fixed expectation is up for grabs because “The God of the future...[relieves] us [of] our securities and uses even our guilt as the occasion of his freedom for us....The God of Israel and of Jesus’ resurrection,” says Jens, “is eternal in this way.”

And if God is eternal in this way, God is not some timeless deity, far off in an endless realm of being, a God for whom we must search our whole lives long and never find in any way that finally ends our radical insecurity and meets our need for refuge. Rather the God of the Future is always coming toward us in time with “the possibility of novelty”: with the promise of all things being made new. In this sense, the water made sweet, the manna from heaven, the spring gushing from a rock in the desert, these “miracles” were nothing other than the future coming toward a ragtag but chosen tribe of Bedouins in the wilderness, giving them a glimpse of what was ahead. The cloud by day and fire by night that accompanied them, the insecurity and fear that dogged them, were foretastes of the life that must be dared rather than hoarded, moment by moment.

So the second question begs the third: Is this God the God who is among us or not? To answer that question, neither can we begin with timeless abstractions—the immutable, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient God of old theologians. We can only begin with the story about the one who, in the fullness of time, was found in human form. We can only tell ourselves the story of his life, death and resurrection, asking with Jens, “What must God be like if he is this one?” Details abound; you can read the story for yourself. But the identifier that runs through each chapter and verse is that of the God whose love empties itself, humbles itself, gives itself away, not counting the cost. The love that comes toward us from the future, says Jens, is neither a sentiment nor a feeling but is “short-hand for a narrative: death and resurrection...death and resurrection is what love concretely means. If I love, I give my future to the freedom of the beloved. If I love, I promise to my beloved not this or that, but my future self.” You and I may manage to promise this until death do us part, whether it be the death that puts us in the grave or the death that finds one or the other of us walking out the door. But the one who was found in human form, the one who humbled himself and became obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross, he is the one whose love, alone, never quits.

Is the Lord among us? I know no other way to answer that question than to read and reread the story we have been given, asking in the midst of our life together: What must God be like if he is this one? I need not search for him, because he is coming to me. I need not set out on a quest to find him, but only try to follow him, to be his disciple. I need not anxiously ask after my future, for in him I have beheld myself whole.

“I remember them saying,” wrote James Carroll, priest turned novelist, “as I had said myself, that all we know of God is revealed in Jesus Christ. I arrived in the Holy Land wanting to believe that but not knowing what it meant....I found myself living in a monks’ house that was

halfway between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Halfway, I understood at once, between birth and death. Halfway, I suspected, between belief and disbelief.

“What little I saw of Jesus was from the hill. I traced the road with my eyes...from the village where he was born to the city where he died....I longed to see my days in his. I looked at Bethlehem, turned and looked again. Human beings had waited and watched here for centuries, for millennia; I would be one of them....

“[So] I turned toward...Jesus as leaves in the morning turn toward the sun. The man described there was one of us. He would be with us drinking until dawn. He would cook us omelets on the beach and mock our piety. He would rebuke our ease with lies, never allowing us to forget the hunger stalking bodies and souls. He would show us not only how to pray but how to doubt. Only after making atheists of all of us would he teach us new names for the being who seemed too far away and yet a part of ourselves.” Thanks be for this Lord who dwells, even now, even here, among us. Amen.