

“Is the Lord Among Us or Not?” - Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5:1-11
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church

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“Child of blessing, child of promise, baptized with the Spirit’s sign, with this water God has sealed you, unto love and grace divine. Child of God, your loving Parent, learn to know whose child you are. Grow to laugh and sing and worship, trust and love God more than all.”

My home church sang these words of the hymn, “Child of Blessing, Child of Promise” a few years ago, as we celebrated the Sacrament of Baptism for a young girl in our church. Family and friends had made their way to South Carolina, quite literally from coast to coast, to be there for the big day.

As baptisms go, everything seemed to go on without a hitch. Vows were made, songs were sung, the baby cried as soon as the water touched her head, and the congregation let out an audible and predictable “awwwwww.”

Like most baptisms I’ve been a witness to, the scene was one that highlighted the innocence of the baby and of God’s action and love long before she is able to realize it for herself.

There was also a sense of security in our church that morning, as the child was in a safe environment...surrounded by parents, extended family, and a congregation of believers...all there to make vows to help raise and nurture her.

The Lord was surely among us that day.

Listen, if you would, to some of the words that were prayed in thanksgiving over the baptismal waters.

“We thank you, Gracious God, for the gift of water. Over water your Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through water you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt and into the land of promise. In water your son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit. We thank you, loving God, for the water of baptism. By it we share in the resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. In it we receive your healing, which makes us whole. Now pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, and upon this water that it may be a fountain of new birth. May all who pass through these waters be delivered from death to life, from bondage to freedom.”

These are beautiful and comforting words about the power of baptismal waters...all prayed in a safe and sacred space.

What was particularly interesting that morning to me, though, is that our text from Exodus happened to be one of the lectionary texts. So with this text in the back of my mind, I started to wonder about what will happen when that baby grows up and finds herself long past the innocence of a day like that day and beyond the safe environment in which she received the sacrament of baptism. What will happen when she is met with the harsh realities of life? What will happen when she is in the wilderness...and thirsty.

Will she not then wonder if the Lord is still among us?

Do you ever wonder the same as you find yourself in the wilderness...and thirsty?

“Is the Lord among us or not?” That is the question the Israelites are grappling with in our text. They are hungry...thirsty...growing weary...complaining...and quarreling with Moses and with the Lord. More importantly they are in the midst of a theological crisis wondering, “Where is God in all of this?”

After all, this was to be a time of extreme joy...a time to celebrate the great work that God had done for them in their deliverance from Egypt...and a time to finally find safety and security.

Instead, they were in the wilderness... suffering... threatening to kill Moses...and wishing they had died in Egypt instead.

Was the Lord among them or not?

Now, I feel like we have a tendency...or at least I have a tendency...to read past these complaints because we know how the story ends. It’s easy to dismiss or maybe even mock the actions and words of the Israelites in these moments.

“Are they really fighting with Moses and quarreling with the Lord? I mean, they were just delivered from Egypt.”

“Come on, are they really complaining about thirst? Every step along their journey, God has provided for them. Don’t they remember the Lord giving them meat to eat in the evening and manna from heaven in the morning? What is wrong with them?”

“Was the Lord among them or not? What kind of question is that? OF COURSE THE LORD WAS AMONG THEM.”

I wonder, though, if we’re being completely honest with ourselves if we simply dismiss the Israelites complaints...as we dismiss their need for their thirst to be quenched in the wilderness.

Don’t you have a thirst that needs to be quenched, even in the midst of God’s provision in your life?

When you look around at what is happening in the world today, do you have a thirst that needs to be quenched?

I ask because there should be a thirst to live in a world where there is no pain and sickness and suffering...because we see what pain and sickness and suffering does to us and to our neighbors.

Is the Lord among us or not?

There should be a thirst to live in a world where the poor don't get poorer and the rich don't get richer...because we see that the least of these are the ones that are most harmed and taken advantage in our society.

Is the Lord among us or not?

There should be a thirst to live in a world where there is peace and not war and death, because we see that war and death just brings on more war and death.

Is the Lord among us or not?

There should be a thirst, even in the midst of thanking God for the calm waters of baptism, that raging floods and tornados and other natural disasters would subside.

Is the Lord among us or not?

Sadly, I could keep going on and on. Just open your newspapers...turn on the news. You see it all already.

Is the Lord among us or not?

Think back to our text from Romans that we just read. It says, "and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

"And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Is the Lord among us or not?

Well yes, the Lord is among us. And not just in the ways we normally think of God. Our text from Romans reveals something incredibly important to remember: God's love is poured into hearts.

The Lord is indeed among us, quite literally.

Now that doesn't stop bad things from happening and it unfortunately doesn't mean we can rid the world of evil with the snap of our fingers.

What it does mean, however, is that who we are...and, in turn, what we do...is an extension of God and God's work in the world.

At minimum, the Lord is among us because God's love is poured into our hearts and into our actions.

I'm sure that as you all have been watching the news, you've seen what is going on in Italy. They are amongst the worst hit by the COVID-19 Coronavirus. As of yesterday, they had a confirmed 21,000 cases and were getting close to 1,500 deaths from the disease. The entire nation has been put into lockdown and quarantine. That's 60 million people, confined to their homes.

I'm sure there are plenty there who are asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

I'm sure some of you have seen the videos of this, but something special has been happening around neighborhoods throughout Italy. Even though confined to their homes, some have begun to sing aloud together...from their balconies and through open windows. They sing.

And its spreading. Videos have emerged from Rome to Turin, from Siena to Sicily, from Naples to Florence. They sing.

One person is quoted as saying, "People breaking out in song, lifting each other's spirits during this tragedy, is an act of striking beauty."

Another says, "It's a reminder that, especially during a tragedy, the human spirit keeps us all going in hope. We shine our best in the darkness."

The Italians were inspired by the citizens of Wuhan, China who, as they were first quarantined, would sing their own songs from their homes, along with chants of "Stay strong, Wuhan!" and "Keep it up, Wuhan!"

To me, it is acts like these that show the goodness that humanity is capable of ...which is so desperately needed in times like these.

It is acts like these that show God's love poured into humanity's hearts...and then overflowing into the lives of our fellow sisters and brothers.

Most importantly, though, it is acts like these that show me that the Lord is indeed among us.

Friends, we have uncertain times ahead of us on top of all the normal things that come with our complicated lives.

I invite you over this next week and through the rest of the season of Lent to continue your journey: one where we recognize that the Lord is indeed among us, working in and through us in midst of this time of darkness.

And maybe...just maybe...we can hope against all hope that the world's thirsts can begin to be quenched.

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