

**2020 PRE-GENERAL CONFERENCE BRIEFING**  
**January 22-24, 2020**  
**Nashville, Tennessee**

**Is the Lord Among Us or Not?**

**Joshua 1:9**

**Exodus 17:1-7**

Good morning, Church! Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and Jesus Christ, the Light, that has come into the world.

I want to thank the Planning Team for this 2020 Pre-General Conference Briefing for the invitation to preach the Word of God as we begin this event.

I welcome each of you with deepest admiration and respect for your servant leadership to Christ and The United Methodist Church, particularly in this season of uncertainty. Truly this is a time to remember "that God is still able."

Later this morning, you will receive a formal welcome to Minneapolis from our local Host Team. But, I want to take this opportunity to extend my personal welcome to each of you. The Dakotas-Minnesota Area has been preparing for your arrival in Minneapolis for over two years. We look forward to introducing you to the hospitality of the True North.

Friends, let me begin with a personal confession. I come to this Briefing and my preparations for the General Conference in May with more doubts and questions than with certainty and answers. Am I alone here? Anyone else feel compelled to confess you are filled with pervasive doubts and questions or unrelenting anxiety? Is there anyone among us who is confident they have all the correct answers to our questions? Questions like:

- Will the 2020 General Conference be a repeat of the 2019 Special Session?
- Is the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation the way forward?
- Will a new form of unity or new expression of connectionalism emerge from our decisions?
- Is there such a thing as amicable separation?
- What will be our Methodist witness to a world that has precious few models of reconciliation, hope and healing?

These are only a few of my questions. I have many more. And, I know if I directed you to go to the microphones and share your questions, we would be here all day.

I come this morning, in part, to assure you that your questions are okay; they are appropriate; they are necessary. The entire faith journey is one of courageously engaging the questions posed throughout the scriptures. Questions like those addressed to us by God or Jesus. Questions like:

- Where are you? (Genesis 3:9)
- Do you want to be healed? (John 5:6)
- Who do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:15)
- Do you love me? (John 21:16)

Or, questions like those we are repeatedly addressing to God or Jesus. You know these questions. You have asked these questions. These questions are the markers along our journeys toward being made perfect in love. Without these questions, our growth in Christ, our discipleship, would have been arrested at the point when we first said “yes” to Jesus. These are our soul questions. These are our heart questions. Questions like:

- What must I do to inherit eternal life? (Luke 10:25)
- Where do you get that living water? (John 4:11)
- Who is my neighbor? (Luke 10:29)
- When was it we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? (Matthew 25:37)
- How can anyone be born after having grown old? (John 3:4)

And, then the question for us today – “Is the Lord among us or not?” (Exodus 17:7)

I love the Exodus story. Don’t you? The stories of the Hebrew tribes wandering in the wilderness seeking the Promised Land are so compelling because at every twist and turn of their 40-year journey (or was it 47 years?), with every moment of crisis, with every experience of being forged and formed into the People of God, we see ourselves. We see ourselves in the struggles. We see ourselves in the questions. We see ourselves in the temptations and doubts. We see ourselves even in those fleeting moments of belief and faithfulness.

One of the stories that speaks most poignantly to the human condition – to our current spiritual condition – unfolds when the Hebrew tribes arrived at Rephidim. There wasn’t a drop of water for the people to drink. The quarreling and complaining began. (This is about us.) They were angry with Moses and ordered him to give them water. They quarreled with God and cried out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

How many of us here today have asked this question at points along our journey with God? Perhaps numerous times. Perhaps, even today. I am certain we have all asked this question. Perhaps, even shaking our fist at God; perhaps quarreling with God. I cried out in anger and anguish “Is the Lord with me or not?” when my younger brother died of heart disease at age 20.

- When senseless tragedy strikes, we cry out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”
- When the forces of nature overrun us and homes are swept away by flood waters or blown away by hurricanes and tornadoes, we cry out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”
- When the economy is designed to help the rich get richer and the poor receive the bill, we cry out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”
- When nearly 30,000 children will die today from preventable diseases while nations prepare for wars and rumors of wars, we cry out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”
- When the lines of homeless and hungry continue to swell, we cry out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

- When racism and white supremacy and privilege become the acceptable currency of the realm, we cry out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”
- When we use God’s Word to hurt and exclude God’s beloved, or to compromise the expanse of God’s love for all, we cry out, “Is the Lord with us or not?”
- When it became abundantly and painfully clear in St. Louis that the UMC would separate, we cried out, “Is the Lord with us or not?”
- When we face the agonizing reality that our own local congregations and conferences may well be torn asunder and cherished personal and collegial relationships destroyed, we cry out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Well, it’s about time for some Good News. I began with confessing my own doubts and questions and invited you into my reality – actually our common reality. But, it is time to turn the corner from confession to profession. It is time to proclaim the Good News.

Friends, always pay attention to the questions in your soul or your heart. Always pay attention to the questions that well up in your throats and cascade from your lips – particularly in a time such as this. Always pay attention to the questions others bring to you in the midst of holy conversations. For here is the truth: The questions always mean God is about to reveal God’s self; Christ is about to reveal himself. The questions always mean God is seeking us; yearning for us; whispering to us. The questions always mean Jesus is about to arrive. Do you remember Mary’s question: “How can this be?”

Friends, I believe we need to pay attention to these questions. Questions like:

- Is the Lord among us or not?
- Is the Lord in the Protocol proposal?
- Will we let the Lord work through our regimented and politicized legislative processes?
- Is the Lord still able?
- Are we willing to set aside our preferences long enough to hear God’s still small voice?

I believe we are asking these questions precisely because we want God to reveal God’s self to us. We want Jesus to show up!

Isn’t that what happened at Massah, the Testing-Place? Isn’t that what happened at Meribah, the Quarreling-Place? The people cried out with anguish and complaint, “Is the Lord among us or not?” And, Moses struck the rock with his staff and God was revealed – God was revealed – in the fresh water that gushed from the desert stone. Our questions always point to God’s faithfulness, to God’s miraculous, mysterious, life-altering revelation and grace.

Minneapolis is likely to be our Massah – our Testing-Place. Minneapolis is likely to be our Meribah – our Quarreling-Place. But Minneapolis is also a city of lakes and rivers. The Mississippi River which connects, feeds and heals the North American continent flows through Minneapolis. Minneapolis can also be our desert rock – our source of living water. Minneapolis can also be the place where Jesus’ prophecy recorded in John 7:38 is fulfilled: “Out of the believers’ hearts shall flow rivers of living water.” Minneapolis can also be the place where we re-dig the ancient wells that give us access to the living water of our Wesleyan heritage, just like Isaac re-dug his father Abraham’s wells. (Genesis 26:18)

Minneapolis can be the place where God pours out God's extravagant love and grace on a hurting, broken, anxious church and liberates us from our conflict.

So, here is more good news. God always calls forth and commissions leaders to strike the rock so that the people may drink; so that the people may be restored; so that the people may know that God is faithful; so that the people may be reminded that God is still able. So that the people may know God – may come face-to-face with God.

A fundamental spiritual question confronts everyone in this room, every delegate to the 2020 General Conference, every person who will assist in leading or hosting or administering or communicating about the General Conference; will you – will we – say “yes” to God's command to “go on ahead of the people ... and strike the rock ... so that the people may drink” of God's life-giving, life-altering, life-sustaining, life-resurrecting mercy, justice and love. God is commanding you – commanding us – just as he did Joshua when he anointed him to take the Hebrew tribes across the Jordan. And, the command, the commission, the plea is this: “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

We know the answer to that quarrelsome, testing, fearful, anguished question, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Time and time again, we have inclined our hearts toward God and said, “We hear you, Sovereign One. We know we are in your presence. We trust you to strike the rock. We believe the living water can flow out of our hearts. We know you will never abandon us, nor let us go. We hear the rustling and rushing of your Spirit-breath. You are near. You are always near. You are right here. Nothing can swallow up your victory in Christ. You know that our future as a Methodist Movement is not in our actions, or even in our beliefs, but in your promises and resurrection power.

So, what is your answer, my friends and colleagues? Is the Lord among us or not? Yes!

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! Because you are giving yourselves over to the unlimited imagination of God.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! Because you stand on tiptoes, expectantly, eagerly, prayerfully seeking God's presence and purpose.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! Because you are seeking a future church that is fully open, inclusive and welcoming of all of God's people.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! Because you envision a church which always takes risks on behalf of the least and the lost, the infirm and the immigrant, the forlorn and the forgotten, the left behind and the left out.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! Because you can only see a church that eliminates racism and white supremacy.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! Because you are becoming obedient, even to the point of death – your personal sacrifice – and perhaps the death of our current expression of The United Methodist Church – so that others might have abundant life.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! Because God is touching you – even in this moment – and releasing God’s life-giving, hope-giving, shalom-giving water into the wilderness.

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! Because you rejoice in the Lord always and announce to an anxious People called Methodists, “The Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!”

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! The Good News is, the answer is always, yes. The answer is yes, yes, yes – always yes.

- Yes; Jesus is always serving up Living Water.
- Yes; God always reveals God’s self in the wilderness times.
- Yes; God will work through you, the living stones, to reveal God’s extravagant love and grace to a hurting, broken, fearful – yet stubbornly hopeful -- global church.
- Yes, God is still able.

Friends, you are our church’s Joshuas. You are the ones God has called, elected, anointed for such a time as this. You are the ones God will use to take the General Conference and the Methodist Movement across the Jordan. Hold fast to this charge. Obey this command. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9)

Is the Lord among us or not? Yes! Yes! Yes! Always, yes! May it be so.

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