

## **Troubling the Water**

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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*3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent (Year A)*

Exodus 17:1-7



It is the question decisively asked and answered in this text, and so we might as well hear it at the beginning of things this morning: “Is the LORD among us or not?”

The question is asked by a thirsty people, worn down by the journey, at the edge of life, a people who have exhausted their own resources and in desperation and deep need ask, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

The LORD was among them in power while they were slaves in Egypt, toppling Pharaoh, splitting the great Red Sea, leading them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The LORD was among them, had pledged to be their God, to be with them, among them, beneath them, around them. They believed. They trusted.

But now...

One summer when I was in high school I worked for a man in our neighborhood out in some of his fields. I should not say one summer; it was one week of one summer. That was all I could take. That summer I learned a few things about myself, and one of those things is how incapable I was at swinging what is called in Alabama a sling blade. That’s what I was supposed to do, clear these tall grasses with a sling blade. It was ninety-five degrees – Alabama ninety-five degrees – which is a close a preview of hell as one can get. I was driven in the back of a pick-up truck and dropped off along a dirt road with my sling blade and a promise from my neighbor that he would be back a bit later. There were five other laborers with me and we were all working a lonely stretch of land.

I have tried to put most of that week out of my mind, but one thing stays with me – every two hours or so the neighbor would bring his pick-up by, and it had a clear tank of ice water in it. He would stop the truck, get a water bottle and fill it from the tank, handing it down to me. The sight of that truck was like the coming Kingdom of Heaven, and I don’t think water has ever tasted as good to me as it did that long week in the fields.

The thirst was only compounded by the fear that occasionally swept over me: What if the truck doesn't come? What then? But it did, like clockwork, and soon enough I trusted the arrival of the truck enough to put the fear away and put my mind and body back to the work.

Israel in the desert still has a memory of life in Egypt. They may have been slaves, but the water trucks ran on time. They didn't know thirst like this. What kind of God is it that brings them out of Egypt only to die of thirst in the desert?

It is a fair question. It is a question I'm certain I would ask. It is a question I have asked, and I imagine perhaps a few of you as well. "Is the LORD among us or not?"

A man lies dying of a rare disease, his family circling him with love and prayers – lots of prayers. Some of those prayers go unspoken, but they are very real. "Why? He is a good man. This makes no sense. Are you there, God? Is the LORD among us or not?"

A woman once told me that after her husband was burned in a fire and spent the rest of his life battling pain and trying to hide the scarring, she prayed every night for strength for herself and for him to be free of pain and anxiety. Then she paused, and said, "I also tell God that when I see him, I have some questions I want to ask face to face. I hope I do see him." The last statement felt like a question, a hint of doubt. "Is the LORD among us or not?"

The job I had before coming here was the Executive Director of the Commission on the Ministry of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. An aspect of this job was to be a pastor to pastors in that denomination. There were many small, rural churches being served by faithful men and women. But the fact is that the same pressures facing most churches in our day faced them as well, and they had far fewer resources to fall back on. Many of these pastors were serving as chaplains for churches that were dying. I heard the question put in many ways by these seminary-educated folks, many of whom came of age in a time when the churches were full, had dedicated their lives to it, asking me in the quiet of their studies or living rooms, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Walter Brueggemann says, "That is what Lent is about, is it not?...to come face to face with God in need because there is no alternative. Lent is about the raw, deepest need in our own life. The water question is turned into the God question concerning the One who "leads us beside still waters..." Is the LORD among us, or not?"

It is a legitimate question, all variations of it legitimate. It is asked in honesty. It is asked by a people who have nothing to lose, and who demand that God deliver. "Here

they are,” Moses says to God, “and you brought them out here. They are about to stone me. They need you. I need you.”

And the answer is “Yes.” Yes, God is among us. God tells Moses to take the staff he used to strike the Nile River and turn it to blood, a powerful memory of God’s presence in the past. He is to take elders with him as witnesses so that the memory of this presence will be sustained. He passes in front of the people, so they will see and remember. And God promises that Moses will see God there at the rock, so Moses will know, once again, that God is present, that God is among the people, and with him.

The gift is given as water from a rock, as sure a sign of grace as I can imagine. There is no more unlikely place for water to spring up than from flint rock in the middle of a desert. God has responded to the need with a firm and decisive yes, an unlikely yes, a yes that answers the people’s questions about God’s presence but also reveals something about the nature of the God who is present to them.

God does not deal the way Pharaoh does; God’s ways are not Egypt’s ways. Egypt provided water, food, a roof over their heads and a predictable, manageable life. They are easy gifts, to quote one writer, but they have an enormous price tag. What Israel exchanges for this easy god of Egypt is their very freedom. What the true God, the God of Israel, desires is a way that is “lean and precarious,” one that requires trust.

God desires trust in the wilderness, not to be viewed as faithful simply because God provides all we need, but as faithful because God can be trusted to be with us in all circumstances.

When I returned to Austin this winter, I discovered they had built a labyrinth on the grounds of the seminary, right next to the chapel. Bounded by slate rock and filled with small stones, it takes you on a winding journey to the center. At the entrance to the labyrinth is a large granite fountain. Water gushes from this fountain continuously. There are moments as you walk when it is harder to hear it, moments when you are on the far end, when the sounds of the city – cars and trucks, construction, loud pedestrians – threatens to drown out the sound of the water. I had to focus intently to hear the water in those moments.

Each Sunday our service begins with the acolyte pouring water into this font. It is sometimes easy to miss hearing it. We may be distracted by movement elsewhere in the sanctuary, the regular sounds of people settling in and preparing for worship. It is easy to miss. And when we step out of this sanctuary and into the labyrinthine days of our existence, when the news streaming across the screens is despairing, our own lives

uncertain, it can be hard to hear the water pouring into this font. Our days may be flush and satisfying and we begin believing we are the authors of this goodness, forgetting the font. Or our days may take us winding far away from this source, into wildernesses where we are parched, and we cry out, “Is the LORD among us, or not?”

Lent is a time of invitation to listen – really listen – for the sound of these waters, in deep trust that they are always flowing, and that the promise that we belong to God and that God is with us, that the grace of God is not a mirage, that it flows continuously, is as real as the water poured into this font. Lent is a time for us to pray for eyes to see and ears to hear what is always there, flowing, even now.

As you leave this place today, wherever you go, these waters accompany you, flowing from the rock of God’s faithfulness. May you drink deeply, and be at peace. Amen.