

# **Is the LORD Among Us?**

Fitchburg Nazarene Church

March 22, 2020

by

Rev. Charles W. Pendleton, Jr.

**(This is what I would have preached today, and not the daily devotions I've been writing for you the last 5 days.)**

As I informed you back on the first Sunday of Lent, it was my intention to prepare sermons during Lent, from the English Common Lectionary. Within that document, each day (and each Sunday, specifically) there are four passages which are to be read at some point within a Sunday worship service.

What follows are two of those readings, and a third which I have written out for you. If you desire, read all three (the fourth is my text), but here is the Psalm written out.

**Romans 5:1-11**

**John 4:5-42**

**Psalm 95**

<sup>1</sup>Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;

let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

<sup>2</sup>Let us come before him with thanksgiving

and extol him with music and song.

<sup>3</sup>For the Lord is the great God,

the great King above all gods.

<sup>4</sup>In his hand are the depths of the earth,

and the mountain peaks belong to him.

<sup>5</sup>The sea is his, for he made it,

and his hands formed the dry land.

<sup>6</sup>Come, let us bow down in worship,

let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;

<sup>7</sup>for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if only you would hear his voice, <sup>8</sup>*“Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness, <sup>9</sup>where your ancestors tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did.*

<sup>10</sup>For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, *‘They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.’*

<sup>11</sup>So I declared on oath in my anger,

*‘They shall never enter my rest.’”*

Remember that the purpose of **Lent** is **to prepare the believer for Easter through the means of:**

- Prayer
- doing penance
- mortifying the flesh (fasting, abstinence)
- repentance of sins
- almsgiving, and
- self-denial.

**To prepare the believer for Easter.**

You might ask, *“What kind of preparation does a believer need, for the coming of Easter?”*

Well, let me answer that question by stating a **“truism.”**

***“Anything not attended to, will deteriorate over time.”***

The truth is, that doesn't just apply to our cars, or our homes, or our bodies; it applies to our Christian walk (or, witness) as well. As believers, we need to be vigilant to keep maintaining our vibrant walk with the Lord. What the Church learned centuries ago however, is that people are as likely to neglect their spiritual health, as they are the health of their cars, or homes, or physical health.

That is why the Church has chosen Lent as a time to pay close attention to our spiritual state of being.

Our text this morning is a picture of a people who neglected to follow closely after God – even after He had proven Himself to be their rock, and fortress – and what it meant for them.

Let me at least set up this scripture by telling you that we are about to read the narrative of what happened soon after the Israel's exodus from Egypt.

### **Numbers 20:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.

<sup>2</sup>Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. <sup>3</sup>They quarreled with Moses and said, *“If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! <sup>4</sup>Why did you bring the Lord's community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? <sup>5</sup>Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!”*

<sup>6</sup>Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

<sup>7</sup>The Lord said to Moses, <sup>8</sup>*“Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.”*

<sup>9</sup>So Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence, just as he commanded him. <sup>10</sup>He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in

front of the rock and Moses said to them, “*Listen you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?*” <sup>11</sup>Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

<sup>12</sup>But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “*Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.*”

<sup>13</sup>These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and where he was proved holy among them.

**PRAYER** - go ahead, ask the Lord to instruct your heart this morning – the reading will wait.

We could turn to **Exodus 17** and get a very similar, if not exact same story as the one we just read from **Numbers 20**. There is some disagreement amongst theologians as to whether or not this is the same story told with slight variations, or if it might be two very similar circumstances, where the Lord chose to bring water from a rock to feed the people and flocks of Israel during their flight from Egypt. Of course, there are some good arguments for both thoughts, but really – for us, at least today – it doesn’t really matter. What is germane to our study of this scripture today, is the spiritual state of the children of God.

One of the first things that strikes me about this text is the attitude of the “*people of God.*” Now I shouldn’t be surprised. Most folk are trusting of God when the going is good. Just a month earlier the Israelites had

left Egypt with gold and goods which the Egyptians gave them willingly – JUST LEAVE! They had seen the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day, leading them across the dessert. They had seen the waters open up for them to pass and then close in on and drown the Egyptian army that was pursuing them. Certainly, God was on their side!

But now, they have no water, and they are quarreling with Moses, claiming they should have just died in Egypt instead of thirsting here. I know that it is easy for me to say this because I'm not in their situation, but *“Don't you think God was about to give them the water they needed anyway. Do you really think they had to threaten Moses and question God and His purposes?”*

I think He was about to bless them with water, but now He must do it for an unbelieving, ungrateful people. That's the first thing I see.

The second thing I notice is that Moses (and Aaron?) takes on more power and authority than what he truly owned. In **verse 10b** Moses says, *“Listen, you rebels; must **we** bring you water out of this rock?”* That's dangerous territory from where I'm sitting. As if Moses or Aaron were the ones actually giving Israel water in the dessert. Personally, I think this verse is for anyone who is in leadership. It is important to remember that we are merely vessels God chooses to work through. The power, love, and goodness are Gods. They used to call that *“being too big for your own britches!”* And I'm not talking about needing a diet (although I do).

Lastly, I see that Moses (vs. 11) struck the rock twice with his staff, when what God asked him to do was to speak to the rock, promising water would come out of it. Whether Moses thought that because God had told him to bring his staff with him, that he should use it in some way – I couldn't say. What is evident is that Moses went beyond what God had asked; striking the rock twice.

Earlier I said that **Exodus 17** tells much the same story. The biggest difference is that here, God tells Moses to strike the rock and that water would come out. Again, I don't know if these are one and the same story told a tad differently, or not. What is clear is that, if this is the same story, God only tells Moses to strike the rock; not strike it twice. It would be too easy if **Exodus 17** told us he struck the rock twice, but it doesn't – it only says Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel (strike the rock).

Interestingly enough, Moses was punished (in Numbers 20) for exceeding his instructions, and was forbidden to enter the Holy Land with the Israelites.

**My personal takeaways today are these:**

1. I must learn to trust God, even when I can't see what He has in store for me (just below the surface of the rock).
2. I should do what God tells me to do – not make it up on my own, or “force” my will where God's will has already been made known.

What about you? What are the takeaways God has brought you today from His Word?

## **PRAYER**

Father, please help me to make room in my day for You, for Your Word, for worshipping You. I can tend to grumble too, just like Israel. Please forgive me, Lord. I know You love me and You watch over me, even when I can't see it. Don't let this COVID-19 be my drought! Keep me sensitive to Your Holy Spirit within me, telling me I am Yours; that I am safe within Your arms. Help me not to fall prey to a spirit of fear in these days. Amen.

For your reading pleasure – a short story.

### **The Muddy Bottom**

The heart of man is like a pool of standing water. Look at it on a summer's day, when not a breeze ruffles the surface, not a bird flies over to cast its light shadow on its face. It is so clear, so bright, you may see your own image reflected there. Now cast a stone to the bottom, and watch the effect. The dark mud is rising all around, rank weeds are floating up which you never saw before; the whole pool is in a state of motion, and hardly a drop of water has escaped the foul pollution.

Look at your heart when all outward things go well. No vexing, crossing care mars its tranquil calm, and you think you see the image of Jesus reflected there. It is so long since sin has molested you that you think it has left you alone, and that all is sure within.

(However), let a sudden offence come, an unkind, undeserved rebuke; let pride be touched, or self-will roused, and presently all is lost. Like the waves of an angry sea, the poor mind is tossed from thought to

thought, and finds no rest. The mud is raised from the bottom, and not one corner of that wretched heart is free from its polluting influence. All gentle, soothing thoughts are gone, and one by one the dark weeds are floating on the surface.

(Quiet Thoughts for Quiet Hours.)

**From: The Biblical Illustrator: Volume 1**