

Grumbling at God
Pentecost 16A
PPC
20 September 2020

Philippians 2:1-13
Exodus 17:1-7

Is God among us? Now?

Several years ago I read about Pavel Mircea, a Romanian convict serving time for murder. Pavel tried to sue God in 2005 for breach of contract. "He was supposed to protect me from all evils and instead he gave me to Satan who encouraged me to kill," he argued. In 2007, Nebraska State Senator Ernie Chambers filed his own lawsuit against God, accusing the Almighty of "fearsome floods, egregious earthquakes, horrendous hurricanes, terrifying tornadoes, pestilential plagues" and the like. Imagine if he filed his lawsuit this year - the list would be longer. Predictably, both these lawsuits were dismissed. God doesn't have a legal address.

We can sit here this morning chuckling at the absurdity of both of these lawsuits but in this week's reading from the book of Exodus, we encounter a more dramatic courtroom scene. The setting is Rephidim where the newly freed Israelite slaves have settled for a bit. Traveling from place to place has begun to wear on their nerves. Following God's command has been challenging. They've seen manna rain down from heaven and quail appear to ease their hunger. But now, camped out in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, water has run out and dehydration is imminent. Their thirst has led to the formation of an angry mob, full of panic and fury. They confront Moses, their leader who has assured them that God is among them. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die of thirst?" they demand of Moses. "Give us water to drink."

I confess, every time I read this story I can feel annoyed at these whining amnesiacs. “Didn’t God just lead you all out of slavery?” I think to myself. Because, I, of course, would never become like this in a similar situation. I would remember all that God had done for me. What is wrong with these people?

Moses stands up to the mob and asks them, “Why do you quarrel with me?” He is scared, too, and angry perhaps that God has put him in this position. “Why do you put the Lord to the test?”

It’s important to know that the language, the Hebrew, used here is legal language. The Israelites aren’t only expressing their anger; they’re lodging an official complaint. Essentially, they’re taking God to court. Suing him. God is on trial.

God acts as judge and plaintiff. “You want a trial?” God asks. “Fine. No problem. I’ll give you a trial.”

“Go out in front of the people,” God instructs Moses. “Take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand by you at the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock; water will come down.” Assemble your courtroom, Moses. Gather your witnesses. Bring the rod of judgment. I will be in the stand, waiting.

Moses obeys and miracle follows. We aren’t privy to the frenzied aftermath but can’t you just picture the mob scene as water comes tumbling down the rock? The mad dash towards the gushing water, the jostling of knees and elbows against the slick rock? Can’t you hear the huge sigh of relief that Moses emits?

Now that all have what they want can they believe that God is among them? Massah and Meribah are geographic proof of what happened there. The Israelites

quarreled and they tested the LORD saying, “Is God among us or not?” Impatience and faithlessness characterize the spirit of the people and so attitudes are memorialized in the names given to this place.

Is the Lord among us or not? Maybe the ancient Israelites were afraid they were all alone. Maybe they thought the Exodus had all been a huge mistake. Maybe they’d mis-read the signs and God had abandoned them.

At stake was not God’s existence but God’s presence in the details of their lives. Is God here with us in the desert? Is God among us as we thirst? Is God still here for us?

There’s a certain irony present in these kinds of experiences. It was easier in Egypt to live and not think about God. There, in that system of oppression, the chains of command were brutally clear. The Pharaoh and his slave masters were in charge, period. The slaves didn’t have to think about where to find water. Pharaoh took care of that.

In the desert, by contrast, the Israelites faced all the terrors of true liberty. God would not oppress them into trusting that God was there. “I will stand there,” God promised Moses, knowing that what the people really needed wasn’t the water but the assurance of God’s abiding presence. If the former slaves were convinced that God was present because they found water does that prove that God is present?

Did anyone notice God standing off in the distance, watching, as they splashed and played and drank of the gushing, sparkling water? Did anyone look past the waterfall that day and glimpse the Holy One? Were they actually thinking of God in their moment of wish fulfillment? Scripture says that God was standing there, the trial

apparently over. Once again, God's *hesed*, God's steadfast love and abiding presence were there all along. I'm not sure that anyone really noticed.

"Is God among us or not?" is a question that we may be asking a lot these days. The question, of course, implies that God's presence means nothing and is useless unless God provides what Israel needs. Are we so easily satisfied that the only way we can believe in God's presence is when we get what we desire?

How can God be among us, we ask, when our churches are rapidly declining in membership? How can God be among us when this pandemic drags on and on? How can God be among us when with the death of Ruth Bader Ginsberg we are so sure the worst is yet to come for our democracy? Where is God when the protestors won't stop and we are forced to look at the injustice that has been going on for so long?

Doesn't it make you wonder whether modern Israel should have faith that God is "with Israel"? If that is the case, then as long as Israel is able to prosper and protect herself against her enemies, aren't those enemies outside God's boundaries? What if Israel's present policies are actually threatening God's presence? If God is *with* Israel then is God *against* the Palestinians? Have the oppressed become the oppressors?

God in the dock. God in the shadow. God in the cleft between the rock and water. What does it mean that God goes to such ridiculous lengths to honor our liberty, even when that liberty frees us to ignore God?

We can't forget that God led the Israelites to Rephidim in the first place. Our misguided theologies of prosperity notwithstanding, the God who gives us water also gives us the wilderness. The place of strife is often a holy place. In a great paradox, the

circumstances that often point to God's absence are often the ones that reveal God's presence most richly.

What does "God is with you" mean to the Black people of this land after 400 years of slavery, followed by reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, lynching, and the many steps taken by our government to make it harder for them to vote? What does "God is with you" mean to people in poverty, refugees living in burned refugee camps, survivors of hurricanes who have lost everything? What does "God is with you" mean to those who died in the death camps and to their survivors? What miracle will it take to convince all of those that God is here?

Is God among us or not? Foolishly, we ask the question as if its answer should come to us once and for all. Do we honestly believe that if God proved the Divine presence in one, huge, thunderous, miracle, we'd never ask for reassurance again? Did the resurrection answer the question once and for all?

God doesn't act like that. And even if God did, this story from Exodus teaches us that we'd ask again, anyhow. What the Israelites yearned for - what we yearn for - is not God out there in the cosmos. It's God, right here, in the messy particulars of our lives. We ask again and again because we need to know again and again. Is God among us now? And now? How about now?

In the parched marriage, the gut-wrenching diagnosis, the shrinking paycheck, the untimely death, is God there, we ask. In the war zone, the brothel, the earthquake, the drought and the wildfire, is God there? In the scorching, shape-shifting deserts God leads us into and out of for reasons we might never understand - is God among us or not?

It's the only question that really matters. To ask is to register our need, our yearning and our hope. Those who no longer ask have no faith. To ask this question signifies our willingness to journey into radical freedom, knowing that both the God of the wilderness and the God of plentiful water has compassion for our questions. Faith isn't about a final answer. Faith is the journey through the wilderness that brings us face to face with our own hearts. There we will find God.

As it turns out, God doesn't need a legal address in order to answer our summons. To our eternal surprise, God shows up freely and stands before us. God is in the dock, now as ever. Waiting.

AMEN.