

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
March 12, 2023

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

Exodus 17:1-7

“Is the Lord among us or not?” If I had asked that question at the conclusion of last Sunday’s service, you probably would have responded with a solid, resounding “Yes.” After all, we were finishing a worship experience where we focused on Jesus’ presence with us, especially as we gather at his table for the Lord’s Supper. True, debates and discussions continue about exactly how Jesus is present as we eat the bread and drink the cup, but there’s no disagreement about his desire to be with us, and our need to be present to him. Is the Lord among us or not? Yes, absolutely.

It was about this time three years ago that our church, like so many other congregations, stopped gathering in person for worship. The COVID-19 pandemic was starting to spread more rapidly in our country, so we scaled back, closed down, and began exploring new ways to worship, work, and witness. We found alternative avenues for sustaining our fellowship, practicing generosity, and serving our neighbor. We developed policies and practices that could guide us safely through the unplanned and the unexpected. We went through periods of reopening and closing and reopening. And to this day, we’re still taking gradual steps back into some of our traditions and methods. Some things have changed and will remain changed. We’ll never go completely back to the way things used to be in the life of our church.

But as much as I speak about “we,” I need to speak about the Lord. Our pandemic wilderness journey, which still isn’t over, is more than just a chapter in the story of “us.” It’s most of all a chapter in God’s ongoing story of redemption. In the life of our congregation, the past three years are a testimony to God’s faithfulness, guidance, and provision. In the midst of all the sickness, suffering, and death, all the disruption and disorientation, all the pauses and restarts, all the things we’ve lost and the things we’ve gained, the Lord our God has upheld us, led us, and brought us to this place where we are now in our journey with him. Has the Lord been among us or not? Yes, he has.

But that doesn’t mean that we, like God’s people in all times and places, haven’t wrestled with circumstances and struggled with the Lord himself about what’s happening and why. Deep and difficult questions start to rise to the surface. What’s going on here? Why is this happening to us? Are we ever going to come out of this? When will this end? If only we could go back to the way things used to be. They certainly weren’t perfect, but it sure seems like they were better than this. Is God really here? Does he really see what’s happening? Does he have a plan?

“Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” (v. 3). That’s the question the Israelites put to Moses in today’s text. Actually, they’re putting the question to God. But Moses is God’s man, God’s appointed representative, so the complaints get directed at him. As one commentator has put it, “It seemed like there was not a single tent in the whole wide camp that Moses could walk past without hearing his name being taken in vain by somebody.”<sup>1</sup> So Moses takes the people’s

complaints up the ladder to the Lord. Actually, he begins with a question of his own. What am I supposed to do with these people? They not only want me out, they want me dead.

That's because they're on the verge of death themselves. They're not just going through a "rough patch" in their walk with the Lord. This is a matter of survival. This is the wilderness, desert conditions. Average high temperatures are in the mid-90s, maybe even 100 or more. You're walking long distances during the daytime, carrying your belongings, tending to small children, wrangling livestock along the way. A long day's march with exposure to the sun. High sweat rates. And no water to be found anywhere. Yes, some complaining certainly seems to be in order, at the least. If God is with them, wouldn't he make sure their basic human needs are met?

It turns out that God does know, and does respond. There will be water, and Moses will be instrumental in providing it. But he won't be alone. God tells him to take some of the elders and cross over in front of the people. Maybe that way they can see the thirst and suffering on the faces of the people. They themselves will represent the people, carrying with them the people's hurt and hopes. God also tells Moses to take with him his staff, the same staff Moses had when he and God first met. The same staff God had turned into an object of power through which Moses worked wonders in Egypt and parted the sea, opening the people's path to freedom. Now God will use that staff to liberate his people from captivity to thirst. At God's instruction, Moses strikes the rock and the water flows. Moses is there. The elders are there. And yes, God is there, still present, still powerful, still working.

Is the Lord among us or not? One of the ways that question got answered was through the presence of Moses and the elders. By their presence, they participated in God's merciful, saving action. They were there, in the wilderness, with the people, as witnesses to and signs of God's presence.

Pastor A. W. Tozer said, "God's presence is the central fact of Christianity."<sup>2</sup> This conviction that God comes and is present with his people, and is present to the world, is essential to who we are as Christ's people, individually and together. As I stressed earlier in my example from the pandemic, we can reflect back and see ways that God has been with us, especially during the last few years, giving us the direction and resources we've needed to be a local congregation of his people during this challenging time. God didn't do this just to keep us going and to ensure that our church survives, but also to enable us to be a sign of his presence to others, in our community and beyond. Our witness in the world is a witness to God's presence.

Part of what this means is that each of us followers of Jesus is called to a ministry of presence. Together, we're a living embodiment of Christ, reflecting God's faithful presence to the world. But we also embody Christ in our lives as individual disciples. Like Moses and the elders, we become a means by which God comes to others and responds to their crises, circumstances, and needs. Lisa Wolfe says, "The Israelites have a good point when they demand of Moses, 'Is the Lord among us or not?' If we are not asking that question, someone nearby is, whether because they are drowning in water or thirsting for it, literally or metaphorically."<sup>3</sup>

Is the Lord among us or not? Is the Lord with me or not? Does the Lord see me and know what I'm facing, what I'm going through? I'm guessing you know people in your own life who are asking these kinds of questions. Some are in your family. Some are among your friends. Some are your classmates. Some are your coworkers. Some are in your neighborhood. Some are here in our congregation. Being a follower of Jesus means that

you're called to show up in their lives, to be there in their lives, to be faithful in the ministry of presence. Mike Glenn has captured it well when he says:

But we serve a God who calls us to be there, to be fully present with our brothers and sisters when they suffer and when they celebrate. We believe this so much we talk about a "ministry of presence." That is, we believe that presence is so significant we can engage in ministry without having to say a word. Anyone who has been through any kind of grief or trauma can testify to this. When your world blows up, you don't remember what anyone said but you never forget who was there.<sup>4</sup>

You and I are called to be there for one another. This is especially true when someone in the church, or someone else beyond the life of the church, finds themselves in a wilderness place where dangers and sufferings are great and resources seem small. Your call in Christ is to come alongside that person, or that family, or that group of individuals, whatever their trials and troubles. It could be sickness, grief, guilt, despair, anxiety, depression, family strife, or decisions to be made. Wherever they are in life, or whatever is happening, you're called to be there with them.

This doesn't mean showing up with quick fixes or easy answers. It simply means being present to them, open to participating in their hardship. How? Through prayers, phone calls, cards, emails, text messages, financial and materials gifts, which can all certainly all be used of God to display his compassion. But in so many cases, your own in-person presence becomes the most powerful witness to the Lord's presence.

This doesn't mean that you have to be an expert in theology, or exceptionally insightful and articulate, in order to have a ministry of presence. You don't have to have a Ph.D. in counseling or a certificate in biblical studies. True, you need to be wise about when you've reached the limits of your own gifts and resources, and may need to call upon the help of others who have more experience or expertise. But overall, you simply have to be open and responsive to the guidance of God, discerning when and where he's bringing you into someone else's life as a means of his mercy and an instrument of his provision.

Author Leonard Sweet tells about a letter that a doctor wrote to a church-related magazine. The physician said:

Today I visited an eight-year-old girl dying of cancer. Her body was disfigured by her disease and its treatment. She was in almost constant pain. As I entered her room, I was overcome immediately by her suffering—so unjust, unfair, unreasonable. Even more overpowering was the presence of her grandmother lying in bed beside her with her huge body embracing this precious, inhuman suffering.

I stood in awe, for I knew I was on holy ground. The suffering of innocent children is horrifying beyond words. I will never forget the great and gentle arms of this grandmother. She never spoke while I was there. She was holding and participating in suffering that she could not relieve, and somehow her silent presence was relieving it. No words could express the magnitude of her love.<sup>5</sup>

The ministry of presence. Sometimes it involves words and sometimes it doesn't. There are moments when you need to voice words of comfort, correction, or compassion. There are times when words of Scripture need to be read, words of witness shared, and words of prayer offered. There are also times when you simply need to sit in the silence with someone, or create space for their words through faithful listening. Sometimes they may need to pour forth their sorrow. Sometimes they may need to pour out their complaint against God. Sometimes they may need to cry out to God for help and provision.

Is the Lord among us or not? Is the Lord with me or not? Your ministry of presence to others, whatever forms it takes, is one of the essential ways that God listens to and engages with these questions. He brought forth water in the wilderness for his people, and through your presence he still satisfies the thirsty.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hoezee, Exodus 17:1-7 Commentary. Center for Excellence in Preaching. March 6, 2023.

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-03-06/exodus-171-7-5/> (March 8, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016) 20.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa M. Wolfe. In the Lectionary. March 6, 2023. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/lectionary/march-12-lent-3a-exodus-171-7-psalm-95-john-45-42> (March 8, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Mike Glenn, "Called to Show Up." Jesus Creed. June 17, 2022. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2022/called-to-show-up.html> (March 8, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000) 16.