

Is God With Us?

Exodus 17:1-7

September 27, 2020

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

I found some wisdom this week on social media, of all places. I saw a post by someone named Dr. Aisha Ahmad, who is a Canadian professor, studying international security. She has been in war zones throughout the Middle East doing research under treacherous conditions and with limited conveniences. She wrote this, “The six month mark in any sustained crisis is always difficult. We have all adjusted to this ‘new normal,’ but might now feel like we’re running out of steam...How can we keep going? First, in my experience, this is a very normal time to struggle or slump. I always hit a wall six months into a tough assignment in a disaster zone. The desire to ‘get away’ or ‘make it stop’ is intense. I’ve done this many times, and at six months, it’s like clockwork. This time, our crisis is global and there is nowhere to run. That’s ok. I’ve had to power through that six month hump before and there is life on the other side.” She goes on, “This is my first pandemic, but not my first six month wall. So what can I share to help you? First, the wall is real and normal. And frankly it’s not productive to try to ram your head through it. It will break naturally in about 4-six weeks if you ride it out.” She suggests not worrying about being wildly productive or creative or “sparklingly happy.” “If you can meet obligations and be kind to your loved ones, you get an A+.” She encourages us to take short mental escapes, not fight the six month wall, and trust that it will pass. Having made this far is “proof that we have what it takes to keep going.”

I don’t know about you, but this was helpful and timely. If you count back six months from this past week, it was the first Sunday we didn’t meet together in person, March 22. We tried a conference call that didn’t work, and then we tried out this experiment called zoom. And here we are. We have all learned a lot, endured a lot, made a lot of changes, cried a few tears, felt sorry for ourselves, missed things left behind, made some more adjustments, managed to laugh sometimes, and managed to carry on. Like Dr. Ahmad says, “we have what it takes to keep going” even if we are all hitting the six month wall at the same time.

Today’s passage offers a time when the Israelites had hit their own six month wall of sorts, when they were missing all the things they’d left behind and unsure what their future might look like. It’s their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. I’m not suggesting—at least I hope not to be suggesting—that this pandemic will last for forty years. But their feelings are not far off from our own, and I think we might gain some insight by checking in with them.

Let’s review real quick how they got to this point in the wilderness. God, through Moses, liberated them from generations of enslavement in Egypt. They had toiled at hard labor for Pharaoh and had cried out to the Lord for freedom. God delivered them, they crossed the Red Sea, and now they are headed for the Promised Land. But their wilderness sojourn will last for longer than they had ever imagined.

God has guided them through the wilderness so far with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When they didn’t have any drinkable water, they complained about it, God sweetened the bitter water. When they didn’t any food, they complained about it, God provided quail in the evening and manna every morning.

And yet. And yet they still don't feel safe or secure. There's so much uncertainty. They are already looking backward to Egypt and remembering what seems like creature comforts of abundant food and drink, not remembering the hard labor or punishment or lack of freedom. "Normal" wasn't good for them, yet they are still longing for "normal." This six months of wandering in the wilderness (To be clear, I'm making up the six months part) has had plenty of stumbling blocks. But now they've hit a wall, and it's a tiny clue in the story that tells us so. This time, instead of just complaining, they "quarreled" with Moses about the lack of water to drink. And Moses himself has definitely hit a six month wall. He doesn't know what to do with these people anymore.

Moses goes to God with yet another complaint from the people. God doesn't seem perturbed by whining people, which is just another indication that I am not God. God doesn't lose patience or tell them to find water themselves. God works to help out Moses in whatever ways are possible. God tells Moses to take some elders as witnesses, and go to the rock at Horeb, which is the same place Moses first encountered God at the burning bush, and God would be waiting for them there.

Moses takes the same staff that he used to turn the Nile River to blood, and uses it to provide water to drink rather than take it away. He strikes the rock, water comes out, and the others have witnessed yet another unmistakable sign of God's presence.

It's curious to me, that the people themselves never question, at least in so many words, if God is with them. But when the narrator sums things up at the end, Moses called the place Massah and Meribah, which mean "test" and "quarrel" because "the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord with us or not?""

"Is the Lord with us or not?" That's what all their whining about water and food and longing for Egypt comes down to. If they had had unshakable faith that the Lord was with them, they would have been able to follow whole heartedly, even when the journey was difficult. They wouldn't have been whining and complaining and quarreling with Moses so often. After all, they had had plenty of signs that God was with them. Over and over, constantly really, God had given them plenty of signs and provisions. It was obvious. But they couldn't see it, couldn't take it in, couldn't trust it. They'd spent generations being exploited, so I can imagine that trust wouldn't have come easily to them. Just because they couldn't trust that God was with them didn't mean that God was absent. God was there all along.

And I want to say again, that God is not upset with them. Moses loses his cool, more than once, and this won't be the last time. But their inability to trust and to see God's presence doesn't upset God. God isn't mad. God isn't impatient. God continues to give them what they need, to work even harder to reassure them.

I'm sure there have been times in the last six months, in the last 24 hours, in the last few minutes, when we might have wondered if God was really with us or not. Is God at work in this pandemic? Is God at work in the unrest and unsettledness and pain and fear and uncertainty in our country? Is the Lord with us or not?

Yes. The Lord is with us. And God is not going to lose patience or get upset if we need to ask that question every so often. God is not going to be angry if we miss all the signs of God's presence among us. God is going to work even harder and more creatively to remind us and give us signs that indeed, the Lord is with us.

The Lord IS with us. Thanks be to God, for we could not do this alone. God's presence is what we need to keep going. And it is what we have, in abundance.