

Since we've been moving through this Exodus text these past weeks, I'm sure it is no surprise to you that the Israelites are still where we left them, complaining to Moses and their God, still having trouble understanding deliverance, whether it takes place in a big, showy miracle like the parting of the Red Sea or whether it takes place quietly when water just starts flowing out of a rock.

But the Israelites ask a question that we are still asking today. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

I find some comfort that our question today was their question as well. Because one might think that the parting of the Red Sea and the Manna in the Wilderness would have been visible enough signs of God's presence. One might think that people who had seen the Lord traveling in a pillar of cloud and fire wouldn't have to ask the same questions we do today.

But they do.

Which means one of two things. One, either the presence of the Divine in our world is tricky enough to detect that miracles don't play the role in that we might expect. Or, two, perhaps there are miracles all around us, like the water flowing out of the rock, and we are just as unable to see them as the Israelites were.

Maybe that is our question for the week. "Is the Lord among us or not?" But, I also invite you to notice that in this text, God doesn't provide water for the Israelites to show them that God is with them. **God gives them water because they are thirsty.**

Our motives in looking for miracles may be about figuring out if God is with us in this game called Life, but we need not to assume those are God's motives too. The miracles in this world, whether we see them in unexplained healing, or in having just enough money to pay the bills, or in bigger or more showier manifestations, the miracles in this world might just be the way God notices that we are thirsty and then takes care of it. "Strike the rock", God tells Moses, "and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."

I confess that I spent a fair amount of time this week wondering what was the connection between our lectionary passages from Exodus in the Old Testament and Paul's New Testament letter to the church in Philippi. And I think it is the question posed in Exodus. "Is the Lord among us or not?" To get there, however, you might need to bear with me during a slight diversion. Because before we get to Philippians, we need to be clear about the way that Jesus changed the way we understand who God is.

After the Exodus, over the years, the Israelites continued to work on recognizing God's provision in their lives. They grew into their role as God's people, learning to pray this prayer:

**Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.**

**Shema**— listen, or hear and "act on"

**Yisrael** — Israel, in the sense of the people or congregation of Israel

**Adonai** — often translated as "Lord", it is used in place of the YHWH

**Eloheinu** — our God, the word "El" or "Eloheinu" signifying "our" God,

**Echad** — the Hebrew word for the absolute number 1

I bring up this prayer, found in Deut 6, because it is a part of all morning and evening Jewish prayer services. "Hear O Israel, The Lord is our God. The Lord is One". This statement of belief, of belonging, of one-ness is fundamental to understanding what Judaism is and was.

This one-ness of God undergirds all Jewish thought and belief. We Presbyterian flavored Christians are also monotheists. We affirm this prayer as well as the Hebrew Scriptures, which are our Old, or First Testament.

But, when the followers of Jesus started making claims about Jesus being God, it didn't go over well at the synagogues and temple. Because to claim Jesus as one with God is blasphemy.

And I wonder what that must have been like for those early Christians. How do you make your experience of Jesus fit in with thousands of years of prayers and teaching? Because there wasn't the expectation among any one of the time that God would be born in human form. They were awaiting a Messiah, an anointed one, who was going to lead them to victory and salvation, but that Messiah wasn't God and there wasn't an expectation of God coming down to earth and becoming human.

And yet, that is what God did in the person of Jesus. And even for those who were hoping he was the Messiah, that didn't turn out as they were hoping either. A humiliating death on a cross was hardly the way they were expecting their Messiah to defeat the Roman occupation.

Most scholars believe that in the text we read this morning from his letter to the Philippians, Paul is using a hymn from the early church. The text of 2:6-11 is poetic in the English, but even more so in the Greek. And before we look at how Paul is using the hymn, let's think about what led those early Christian hymn writers to come up with these lyrics.

Remember the Israelites' question? "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Somehow this bunch of monotheists who had experienced the Divine in the person of Jesus came up with this beautiful and poetic language to describe how the Divine became human and answered their question.

“Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

I know this language may sound familiar and comforting to us, but consider for a moment how odd the claim is. Jesus, who Paul is suggesting we emulate—remember--this Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and then he humbled himself.

In no culture was—or is—this the way to show leadership or authority. But we, my friends, are the followers of a God who emptied himself and lost everything according to the rules of the world.

And Paul is reminding the Philippians and reminding us that not only is this how God behaves, but this is how we are to behave. Because it is in this emptying of himself that Christ found true authority. Not as the world gives. But as God gives.

But, of course, this emptying of ourselves is, for me at least, tough to do. The Israelites didn't do very well either, did they? God wanted them to let go and to learn to follow directions and trust that God would provide.

But it is hard to do. I believe they wanted to trust God, but when your next drink of water is on the line, when your survival in the wilderness seems to be up for grabs, you want to know long term plans. You want to see the solution.

Please know that when I preach about letting go of control, of emptying myself and sitting back and trusting that God is in charge, I'm really preaching to myself as much as anyone else. I am notorious for wanting to be in control, to know what the plan is. And my problem, or one of them at least, is that I can often make do on my own. I can go entire weeks without having to acknowledge that I am not in control.

Sometimes my control issues show up in subtle ways. Like when I apply the brakes on the passenger side of the car when my husband is driving the car. I do it all the time. Honestly, I married a saint—a saint who should apply his brakes a little sooner, but a saint nonetheless.

Or hiking down into the Grand Canyon, we walked past some mule teams making their way down the narrow Cliffside path. And as much as I would have appreciated a ride down the hill, I wouldn't have done it because I wouldn't have been in control. What if the mule freaked out and I plummeted into the canyon? The fact that I don't think that had ever happened before

wasn't enough to convince me that mules on narrow trails are a good idea. Why would I trust some strange mule that I don't even know?

But when I went to the Middle East a few years ago, I had to let go of a whole lot of control. I had to trust that I was in God's hands to even get on the plane to Damascus. And things were out of my control the whole time I was there. I didn't know how to get where we were going each day—I had to trust the trip leaders to have it all coordinated. I had to trust the bus drivers on those horrifying roads. I had to trust the translators because I don't speak Arabic. And when we got to Mt Sinai, I found out that the "optional" camel ride up to the top of the mountain (remember my opinions about beasts on hillsides) was not actually optional. We were all going to ride camels, in the pitch black, up to the top of Mt Sinai so we could watch the sun rise. I had not even ridden a horse, but I had to trust an animal I'd never seen before and rely on something other than my own two feet to get me to the sunrise. I had to empty out that last little illusion of control and climb on the camel.

And, you know what? It was one of the highlights of my life. Sitting there on the camel, in the middle of the night, with darkness all around and in the sky a blanket of stars like I'd never seen before. I knew we were on the side of a mountain, but I couldn't tell if I was 10 feet or 10 inches away from the edge. I had to trust my camel and Samir, the kid who was guiding the camel to the top. And what I discovered, on that silent ride up the mountain, was that when I let go and emptied myself of my need for control, God came in to that empty space. On that dark and holy mountain, I had an answer to the question. God is among us.

But to know it, we have to look in unlikely places. In rocks that suddenly give us water. In a carpenter from Nazareth, crucified as a criminal by Rome.

The situation on Wall Street might be the perfect illustration of a situation where our illusion of control is being shattered. We still need to pay attention to our accounts, and communicate with our congressional leaders, but I suspect this situation is as outside of your control as it is of mine. I can't write a check for \$700 billion. I can't keep banks afloat. I can't predict the outcome of any of it. "So, okay, God," we say when the stock markets are reeling and the economy seems to be on the brink of collapse, "are you among us or not?" As we empty ourselves and ask that question this week, I invite us to look in the unlikely places for signs of Divine presence. And we can find comfort in Paul's words. And I hope our leaders hear them as well.

If there is any encouragement in Christ,  
Any consolation from love,  
Any sharing in the Spirit

Any compassion and sympathy

Make my JOY complete—

Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

How does that saying go? We don't know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future. AMEN.