

## **“Is the Lord among us or not?”**

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Exodus 17:1-7

“Is the Lord among us or not?” That’s the question people of Israel were asking as they wandered in the wilderness. I imagine Moses himself might have been asking the same question. Certainly there is concern and frustration on the part of Moses. We know Moses is frustrated and frightened because he says to God. “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

Since I have not spent any time on the Exodus story that we have been reading for the past several weeks let us take a moment to rewind the story.

The past several weeks have been stories of thirst, hunger and thirst. Back a few weeks ago they are thirsty and Moses finds a spring but the water is bitter. God tells Moses to throw a stick into the water and it becomes drinkable and they are satisfied. Then a week ago we had the story about God providing quails and manna for their hunger. This week they are again thirsty. God sends Moses out into the wilderness, instructs him to tap a specific rock and water gushes out. Again they have water.

What happens though in each of these is that the people are grumbling, angry, in fact so angry Moses is worried this week that they will stone him. They all look backwards and long for the good old days. Oh when we were in Egypt sitting by the fleshpots with the onions and leeks. Yet they seem to forget that they were slaves and treated horribly.

So what does this have to do with us today? It is a foundational story of the Jewish religion in fact it is the most important of all the stories in the Bible. The Exodus defines who the Jewish people are. The wilderness theme is also a central theme in the Bible. Think of all the times people, prophets and even Jesus go into the wilderness. Why?

Now many paint the wilderness as a negative place and many people consider wilderness time as negative. However a wilderness experience can also be one of great growth and development. That is ultimately what the 40 years of Israel’s wander is all about. Out of this crucible the nation of Israel is formed.

We have forgotten that in a large part of the world a time in the wilderness is part of the process of growing up. American Indian males would be sent into the wilderness as adolescents to find themselves. They had a quest that often resulted in their finding their adult name, and claim their adult identity. My Camino walk was in reality a wilderness time. We have lost that sense of quest in the wilderness in our modern world. As a result we do not know how to handle the wilderness experiences that confront us in our lives.

It is critical to remember Mount Sinai is placed directly in the middle of the Jewish wilderness experience. It is only in traveling through the wilderness that the people of Israel receive the greatest gift of the Hebrew Scriptures, the law. However they have not arrived there yet in today's reading.

One thing that often happens in the wilderness is a mindset of scarcity. That is what we are seeing in the Israelites in this part of their journey. Three times they have been in trouble and three times God has come through for them. How quickly they seem to forget and how little they trust God. In the part of the Exodus story that is omitted in the lectionary (Exodus 16: 16-21), they are told to gather exactly an omer of manna for each person in their tent. Never mind what an omer is, the experts don't really know. What happens is that no matter how much or how little they gathered, when they weighed what they had, it was an omer. They were told to eat it all for there would be more the next day, but guess what? They didn't listen and some saved pieces of the manna and when they got up the next morning it was filled with worms and became foul. Moses was angry with them; angry because this was as much about their trusting in the Lord as it was about food for them to eat.

This is what an attitude of scarcity does to us. It fosters an attitude that says, there isn't enough along with I have to take care of myself first and not trust anyone else even God. Me first is the message. Yet what does this passage teach us? What do the many passages about God giving us what we need show us? Elijah is fed by the ravens to sustain him during a difficult time. Jesus challenges the disciples to feed the 5000 with just a few loaves and fishes. The message throughout scripture is do not despair, have faith that God will provide. Now what God provides might prove to be a surprise.

I have learned through several events in my life to trust in God to provide what I need. That is different from what I want. When my wife Wendy took over Good Samaritan they had 15 people on a Sunday. Many were talking about what church they would attend when the parish closed. Even the bishop told Wendy to give it a shot, but if it needed to close that was ok. Talk about a challenge to our faith. After all the hard work to get her ordained her first assignment is a failing parish.

Now she prayed, Lord send us the people that we need. And within 6 months first one group home brought some residents and then finally three group homes were bringing men with intellectual disabilities as the word spread that they were welcome at Good Sam. Sunday attendance was now in the low 30s and while money was tight, each month there was always enough to keep the parish open for the next 24 months.

One of the members said, "Wendy we've been praying for new members but this isn't what we meant." Wendy said, "Yes but these are the members that God has sent us." Now Wendy averages 40 or so on a Sunday. 5 years after being told the parish had only 2 years of money, they still have 2 years of money. Good Samaritan has partnered with Enoch Baptist and opened a 2 million dollar Family Life Center. In speaking with Assisting Bishop Magnus at clericus he said, "You know I always thought that Good

Sam had an opportunity in working with Enoch and here I return to the diocese to find out that you've done it. I thought that parish was dead in the water." God provides, have faith.

Today we begin a month actually 6 weeks of our stewardship campaign. We like most churches are in a wilderness period in this country and if we are not careful an attitude of scarcity is scratching at our doors. I for one will not have it. We cannot go there. We are blessed with what we need as long as we believe and respond to God's call to have an attitude of generosity, which is the theme for this year's campaign.

Each week you will have an insert in your bulletin and I really want you to take your bulletin home with the insert and read and pray over the message and the reflection questions. This week's talks about something that gives most Episcopalians fits. It's the T word, tithe. Now I have not said much about that in the past, but I am exactly where today's writer is. I never thought I would be able to tithe, but over the past years as your rector I have reached that point. I tithe and have tithed to St. Aidan's for the past several years. 10% goes directly back to our mission here because I believe in that mission. My donations to the Heritage Fund, the Virginia Seminary, Seton Youth Shelters and all the other charities are on top of the 10%. Wendy also tithes to both Good Samaritan and ODU Canterbury. The amazing thing is, we don't miss the money. In fact our gifts are a source of great joy to us because of what that tithe and the other gifts do. When we started to path to tithing I thought, we'll never do this. Yet God showed us a way to make this happen. What was the answer, I changed my view of the world from one where the Israelites were of I don't have enough to one that saw a world of abundance and a generous, gracious God who always comes through.

So as we enter this season I ask you to say one prayer. Generous God inspire me on my journey to greater generosity. And see what God puts on your heart in terms of a response.