

Is the Lord Among Us or Not?

“... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” Romans 5:8.

Israel, Israel, what are we to do with Israel? God’s people from our first reading have barely begun their new lives of freedom from Egypt and they’re already into their second phase of complaining and grumbling against Moses and ultimately the Lord. This weekend, we find the Israelites slowly making their way away from the Red Sea toward the Promised Land. Sadly, with every day that passes and every step farther from Egypt it seems like Israel grows further and further from their mighty God who had so recently saved them.

Quick recap, after hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt, the Lord sent Moses to lead His people Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. He had heard their cries from their suffering and so the Lord was ready to act to save them and give them relief. With mighty acts and wonders, the Lord used Moses to undermine the power and authority Egypt wielded over Israel. After ten plagues, that grew increasingly devastating for the nation of Egypt, Pharaoh released Israel.

But Pharaoh realizing the loss that Israel was to his kingdom, chased Israel to the edge of the Red Sea. There in Israel’s helpless state, the Lord again acted mightily. He split the Red Sea and allowed His people safe passage through the sea on dry ground. Then as the Egyptian army attempted to pursue, the Lord swallowed them up with the Red Sea so that Israel was completely free from Egypt. In the aftermath of this glorious victory, as challenges arose with supplies of water and food, the Lord provided purified water and manna for His people so that they might be nourished. All this, Israel had witnessed and experienced prior to our reading this weekend.

Israel, Israel, what are we to do with Israel? Knowing everything that the Lord had shown them, it’s difficult not to wonder why Israel’s faith wasn’t stronger. In light of God’s every provision, how in the world could this question be on their hearts and lips, ‘**Is the Lord among us or not?**’ (*Exodus 17:7c*) It’s very tempting to react to Israel’s struggles with disdain because it appears so obvious to us so many years removed from this situation that the Lord was absolutely right there with them. Duh, Israel, don’t you see it? God’s right there, you can’t miss Him!

Yet, in the same way that hindsight is 20/20, it’s very easy for faith to react with greater confidence when the means for the Lord’s plan are clearly known after the fact. You and I have the full story, the people of Israel were living out this story in real time. Their journey to the Promised Land was a huge learning experience that they were completely dependent upon God. The few comforts that they knew and had seen in Egypt were gone. The familiarity that they had with where their provisions would come, even though it was in the midst of Egyptian slavery, was removed. Crossing the Red Sea, led them into a world where there was nothing obvious for them to hold onto for their safety and security. They were in the wilderness and there was nothing there for them to use to provide for themselves. They were utterly dependent upon God to provide something from nothing.

Now, I think many of us might be willing to admit that if we were among the Israelites at that time, we too would raise the same question about the Lord’s presence with similar frequency. Having some greater understanding for all that Israel was experiencing might move us to sympathize with their struggles a little more. However, what I think all of us struggle to freely admit is that we already do this in present even with much greater and clearer provision from the Lord before us. Yes, we may not have witnessed ten plagues, or walked across a sea on dry ground or even been fed through miraculous means, yet we do have numerous other ways the Lord continues to provide in our daily lives. We have the fullness of the God’s Word and Sacraments to remind us of and strengthen us with God’s faithful providing generation after generation, but still we find ourselves just as frequently questioning, ‘**Is the Lord among us or not?**’ (*Exodus 17:7c*)

For Israel back then, it took the lack of water and food for them to grumble and complain against God and His servants. For us now, it still might be the lack of food for ourselves or others that leads us to

grumble and complain about organizations and their leaders – supposed tools in God’s hands – whose corruption and ineffectiveness erode our trust in God’s ability to provide and lead us into apathy and anger. It also might the lack of health and sufficient solutions that cause us to grumble and complain wondering about God’s presence in the midst of our pain. Perhaps it’s the lack of healthy relationships, as the mistreatment and manipulation from an employer, parent, spouse, child, etc. drives us to grumble and complain with great doubt that God’s presence is really in the middle of these broken relationships. Maybe it’s the lack of safety and security in the world around us as mass shootings, pandemics, fatal accidents, cultural tensions, etc. cause us to grumble and complain about governments and authorities with little confidence that God is at work in such turmoil.

Make no mistake, like Israel, we too are wandering. Our journey this side of heaven might not be in such a barren land as the wilderness as Israel was in, but our wandering is still pointing us to the same fact that we are entirely dependent upon God. Yet, we are just as easily distracted, if not more easily distracted, to lose focus on God’s ongoing, faithful provision and care. Sadly, even though you and I likely have many more ways that God has revealed the means of His provision before our eyes than even Israel did, we struggle just as frequently with trusting that God is present and active in the middle of our suffering. Truth is, it’s not just Israel, Israel, what should we do with Israel, our names should be inserted here too, Pastor Dan, Pastor Dan, what should we do with Pastor Dan?

While we so deserve to be treated with the same disdain and disapproval with which we so often want to view those Israelites of old, the very same God who was faithful to faithless Israel continues to remain faithful to faithless us. Paul puts it this way in our second reading this weekend, “... **but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**” (*Romans 5:8*) Yes, this is grace. This is God’s presence among us and for us even as we grumble and complain against Him. He has inserted Himself into this life of suffering and pain, into our lives of sin and turmoil so that His love might be clearly known even now. Jesus lived, died and rose for our sake so that we might not be treated as our faithless actions deserve, but rather instead that we might receive His forgiveness, love, salvation and hope.

With this love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, our perspective of our wandering this side of heaven changes. As we await Jesus’ return, the suffering that comes our way in this life is transformed by the relationship God created and sustains with us in Jesus. Not that we go out seeking suffering, but simply knowing that it will come, we know that as this suffering comes God is present and He is able to even use these moments of suffering for His purpose and plan in our lives. Rooted in the God who lived, suffered, died and rose on his behalf, Paul captures this new perspective this way, “... **we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because, God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.**” (*Romans 5:3-5*)

Rooted in the very same God as Paul, the same God who lived, suffered, died and rose for our sake, we continue our wandering this side of heaven with eternal hope that will not disappoint us. As we continue to learn and grow in that truth that we are completely dependent upon God, we can embrace this truth even in our suffering knowing that God is able to do positive and productive things with these trials. When those moments of suffering come, we know that God remains present and that as He is carrying out His plan, He is also developing endurance, character and hope in us even through these experiences. Right now, and in every circumstance of our lives may the Holy Spirit keep us standing in God’s grace that we have received through faith rejoicing in God’s glorious hope of life eternal in heaven with Him. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan