

“Is The Lord Among Us?”
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Last week, we learned that wilderness is not simply a place, it is a state of mind, an in-between time, removed from what has been, but unable to see what will be. We learned that wilderness is a typology for the life of faith. Through the story of the manna and the quail, we learned God provides in wilderness times. We also learned there’s a testing in the blessing, will we follow God’s instructions or not? This week, we turn to another story of God’s provision in the wilderness, another instance of God responding to the Israelite’s grumbling. Listen for God’s word to us this day from Exodus 17.

Why did God make the world? Why did God make people? Were there dinosaurs on Noah’s Ark? What does God look like? Does God ever need to take a nap? Where does God live? Who made God? How does God talk to us? Why can’t I see God? Why do we have to go to church if God is everywhere? Why do some people die before they are old? These are some of the top 20 questions children ask about God.

The life of faith is filled with questions. What questions do you have about God? Wilderness times have a way of calling forth questions. When we find ourselves wandering in that wilderness between the world as it was, wondering what will be, often questions bubble in our hearts.

Sometimes we ask, **“Why is God doing this?”** This question does not doubt God’s presence or God’s agency in wilderness times. In fact, it assumes God is the reason we find ourselves in the wilderness. That’s a big assumption that is not always right to make. God is not always the cause of wilderness seasons of life. We live in a broken world, and to edit the old bumper sticker, stuff happens. Sometimes our own sin leads us into the wilderness. Sometimes another’s sin causes the loss of life as we’ve known it. Sometimes we can’t figure out who to blame, it just happens and then we have to deal with it, but we can’t blame God for doing it. For example, I have a hard time believing God is the cause of this pandemic. The God I know in Jesus Christ is about giving life and healing people, not causing pandemics that take so much life.

Another question we ask might be, **“Where is God in all this?”** That’s a question guiding our “Wilderness and Wandering” Series. That’s very different from “Why is God doing this?” It does not assume God is the cause, but is sure God is present in the midst of wilderness times. Where is God in wilderness seasons of life? God is providing daily bread. God is testing through the blessing to see if we will follow instructions or not. That’s what we considered last week. Where is God in all this? What is God doing? These are questions I find myself asking more often than not.

It’s not the question the Israelites ask when they find themselves thirsting in the wilderness. They ask a harder question, a more pointed question: **“Is the Lord among us or not?”** That’s a hard question to hear. It does not assume God’s presence, much less God’s agency. That’s all up for grabs. Is the Lord among us or not?

In the case of the Israelites, it’s stunning they are asking it. In their circumstance, God is the reason they are in the wilderness. God led them into that wilderness, freeing them with a mighty hand from slavery in Egypt, dividing the Red Sea so that they could escape Pharaoh’s army. God has rained bread from heaven every morning—six days a week, and every evening quail come to the camp and jump into their pots ready for supper. Yet here, the Israelites are in the midst of that daily abundance, wondering, “Is

the Lord among us or not?” Given these miracles in their midst, how could they be so blind to the presence of God?

Before we get too tough on the Israelites, let us remember they live in the wilderness, in that place between what has been and what is yet to be. The wilderness is a scary place to live. The Israelites weren't blind; they were afraid; for themselves, for their children, for their lives. Fear leaves them questioning what should be obvious, “Is the Lord among us or not?” That question will be asked again and again on the wilderness journey. At least ten more times, the Israelites will wonder about God's presence in the wilderness. They're not blind, they're afraid. That fear causes a crisis of faith that wonders whether God is present or not.

So how is that overcome? **God's instructions to Moses offer a path from fear to faith. “Go on ahead,”** says the Lord to Moses. Keep on keeping on. Do not get stuck in the fear of the moment. Have courage to go forward, Moses. Go on ahead. That's the first thing God says to Moses.

The second thing God says, **“Take some elders with you.”** In the midst of the wilderness moments when we find ourselves wondering, “Is the Lord among us or not,” we cannot go it alone. Faith is a team sport. We need one another, especially in the wilderness when fear threatens faith. Take some elders with you.

The third part of God's word to Moses calls for memory. **“Take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile.”** That was the staff God turned into a snake at the burning bush to try to persuade Moses to answer the call to free God's people. It was the staff Moses used to turn the Nile to blood. It was the staff that called forth the locust to plague Egypt. It was the staff Moses raised to divide the Red Sea. “Take that staff, Moses. Remember. Remember what I've done in the past, that you might hope for the future, and be sustained in the present.” Memory is like manna when we find ourselves wondering if the Lord is among us or not.

“Go on ahead. Take some elders with you. Take your staff.” Keep on keeping on. Don't go it alone. Remember. Then God says, “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb,” answering the question, “Is the Lord among us or not.”

This wilderness season of a pandemic has had a particularly devastating impact on communities like Grier Heights. Covid is far more likely to affect families living in poverty. Economically, they are much more impacted by the unemployment statistics we hear about, and by the furloughs and closures of struggling businesses. When you rely on school to provide two meals a day to your children, virtual school is much more than an inconvenience, it means hunger for your kids. Even internet access is defined by poverty and race in our nation—so the impact of this wilderness season of pandemic is felt even more profoundly by our neighbors in Grier Heights.

At the Community Center run by Crossroads Corp., Ms. T is starting to look like Moses to me. She has created a learning pod there, providing internet access for upwards of 40 children a day, not to mention daily bread—like the Hubee D's we talked about last Sunday. There was a great story on her efforts in last Sunday's *Observer*. CrossRoads secured a \$50K grant and the City of Charlotte is investing another \$75K to install Wi-Fi hotspots that can support 200 simultaneous users in six locations throughout the community. They're “going on ahead.” And they're inviting us to go with them. If you have time to help be a tutor alongside these kids, or if you can provide lunch for 40 one day during the week, we need you. You can learn more about helping on the Outreach Homepage of our website. Who could have imagined years ago when Crossroads was just a dream what would be happening now? Look how God has provided to get us where we are today. Go on ahead, take some elders with you, not to

mention some memories. I guarantee God will be standing there in that Community Center with you, and you'll see waters of hope flowing forth amid some challenging rocks.

Beloved, every day we live in that wilderness world between what once was and what is yet to be. Every day, we live in that crucible where hope and fear converge. When fear bubbles up, the question comes, "Is the Lord among us, or not?" We must never let fear prevail; not in our own lives, not in our relationships, not in our community, not in our nation, not in our world. As people of faith, we are called to keep on keeping on—go on ahead, to do so with one another—take some elders with you, and to remember God's power and provision in our yesterdays, to give us hope for our tomorrows, and sustain us today. We must sling that stick of hope against every rock of despair, that the spring of faith might flow forth. Whenever compassion conquers coldness; whenever justice prevails over inequity; whenever faith overcomes fear; wherever love wins, living water pours forth, faith is forged, and we discover the answer to our questions, the Lord is indeed among us. Amen.