



“Is the Lord Among Us or Not?”

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:4-26

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Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

I was the youth pastor at Carter Memorial Presbyterian Church on the north side of Chicago. The youth group had just finished one of their favorite activities: roller skating at an old fashioned roller rink with a grand organ, followed by pizza.

The pizzeria was in an unfamiliar neighborhood, and at the end of the evening one of the teens gave me directions to the expressway that would take me home. I got something very wrong and quickly found myself hopelessly lost and without a clue where east, west, north or south might be.

It was late at night, which furthered my confusion. What I did figure out was that I was lost and getting “lost.” The further I went, the further it seemed I was in an urban wilderness. It was the late ‘60s, and racial tension was high in Chicago. If it had been the ‘90s, I would have thought I was in the opening scene of Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*. My little Volkswagen and I did not belong in this neighborhood! The combination of anxiety and fear cancelled out any sense of direction that might remain.

Then, off to the right, I spotted a Chicago Police car. I pulled in behind him, jumped out of my car and knocked on the police car’s window. The kindly African-American policeman looked at me and said, “What in the world are you doing down here?” I confessed I was lost and he replied, “Follow me.” He led me to the expressway and pointed me north.

The wilderness is an easy place to get lost; it is also a wonderful place to be found. In fact, getting found in a wilderness is a biblical theme. Israel wandered in the wilderness, but in that wilderness met God. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness, and people flocked to hear his wilderness good news. Jesus began his ministry in the wilderness where his vocation from God was tested. In the gospel lesson, Jesus found a woman who lived in her personal wilderness and gave her new life. These stories bear power and insight centuries later. God calls us to hear them, live ourselves into them, and be transformed by them. In fact, in such stories, we just might find ourselves and find God.

The people of Israel found themselves in a vast and terrifying desert. For centuries they’d been slaves in Egypt. Ruthless, cruel taskmasters and bitter servitude shaped generations of the people of God.

With no human resources on which to depend, the people of Israel called on God for help. It seemed it took forever, but God heard the cries of the people and decisively and powerfully acted on their behalf. The biblical authors put it wonderfully, “...with a mighty arm and outstretched hand, God delivered Israel from bondage.”

As usual, God used human instruments — in this case a Jew brought up in Pharaoh's court whose name was Moses. By craft, a bit of deceit and a few threats, Moses led a quiet revolution and managed to get Pharaoh to let God's people go.

After a notable miracle, Israel found itself safe. Egypt lay on the other side of the Red Sea. Miriam, Moses' sister and a prophet of God, led the people in a great song of deliverance as they danced a dance of freedom. At long last, the people were free.

But Moses soon discovered that it's one thing to begin a people movement or a revolution; it's quite another thing to manage such a movement. God's people were a large group of freed slaves utterly unprepared for a new life of freedom or the rigors of a pilgrimage to a new land. They had no experience of freedom or independence. They'd never before had to take initiative or manage their own lives. They had no resources for this new life, nor any resources for their journey. They had no experience in wilderness survival. All they had was what they could carry and the hope of a new life in a new land. And they found themselves on the edge of a wilderness.

The freedom song beside the Red Sea — "let the good times roll" — quieted quickly in the face of reality. The memory of God's great deliverance faded before the challenge of life in the wilderness. They were frightened, alone and helpless — and soon angry.

They did what people always do when hard times come — they blamed their leader, Moses. No sooner had they stopped singing beside the sea than someone noticed they had no food or water and no road map through the desert. And if Moses knew what he was doing, it wasn't apparent. The complaints began and continued, "Were there no graves in Egypt so you brought us out here to die?" "Slavery in Egypt was better than this. At least we had food for the table and a plan for tomorrow."

Moses, in turn, complained to God and blamed the people for the mess. The irony continues when God replies. "You want food, you ungrateful wretches? I'll give you food until you choke on it!"

It becomes a cycle in the life of God's people. They found themselves in trouble and complained. Moses complained to God. God responded in mercy — and often humor. Then the cycle repeats itself.

Our Old Testament Lesson comes early in the cycle. As usual, Israel finds itself in a precarious position. This time there is no water — and they are in the desert. It's no small issue.

As usual, the people blame Moses, "Why did you bring us out here — to kill us, our livestock, and our children?"

Moses turns to God and blames the people, "What am I going to do with these wretches. They are about to kill me."

It's the dynamic of most conflicts: mutual blame without either side owning any responsibility. It's always somebody else's fault. Never mine.

And, also as usual, when human resources fail, God responds in mercy and provides water. The people live to complain another day.

It is a mistake to limit this story to a literal interpretation. There's more to this story than a notable miracle. At the end of the story, the narrator leans in and tells us that here, as in most of life, the issue isn't the issue. Water, food, and mutual blame are surface issues. Lying beneath it all is the issue of faith or unfaith.

"Is the Lord with us or not?" That was the real question — the question behind the other questions. It is always the question for people of faith.

The people of Israel, like us, could not perceive – and likely didn't try to perceive – how God might be present in the hard times. This story is a critique of utilitarian religion. Israel, like us, judged God by their own expectations of God. If their well-being was in peril, certainly God was absent. If this is happening to me/us, then God is not with us – or God isn't a good and loving God.

This story sounds like a modern TV commercial with a profoundly different bottom line. You know how they begin. He or she has a problem: loneliness, stress, body odor, no sex appeal. Then the product is introduced and the product produces popularity, attractiveness, peace, and, in the end, well-being.

It's false advertising of course. Products are objects, and objects cannot produce what is essentially spiritual, like peace and well-being. To place one's trust in a product is to court disappointment. Disappointment is usually the child of false dreams.

The point of the story, it appears, is that God is source of real life and human well-being. We are creatures and find real selves in the creator. We spend our lives, our time, and our money denying that is true. We think we can manage our lives fine by ourselves and with our own resources. In the end we can't. Human resources always run dry. By definition anything human has limits. God lies beyond human limitations.

A pastor in a wealthy suburb of Chicago told of a woman who came to him for counsel. She told him, "I'd give up the cottage in the woods, the boat in the lake, the mansion in Winnetka, and the country club membership for one minute of real peace and happiness."

This story, as well as the rest of the Bible, report that for people of faith, God is always with us even when we are lost in the wildernesses of our lives. Real life, a good life, is God's promise no matter what – if we trust God with our lives. When our human resources run dry – and they will - we can count on God to give and sustain our hearts and our souls.

The Gospel Lesson, John 4, is a story about a woman without human resources. Jesus was sitting at a well outside the town waiting for his disciples to come back with lunch.

As he waited, a woman approached the well alone. That was odd. Women usually came to the well in groups in the morning and the evening to fetch water for the household. It was high noon and the woman came by herself.

Jesus engaged her in conversation and we quickly discover why she came traveled alone. She'd been married five times and was living with a man who was not her husband. We can scarcely imagine the scandal that was in small town Samaria. The woman was shunned, alone and the object of vicious gossip.

She came to the well carrying a wilderness inside her. Her human resources were few, if any.

Jesus didn't condemn her; he gave her a promise. God is the source of real life, he said, and when life's resources fail – or at any time in life – God gives life for the soul. "I came to provide God's life for people like you," Jesus said. Trust God with your life, give yourself to God and new life will bubble up in the wasteland that is your life."

The woman believed Jesus and became the first Christian evangelist! She ran to town to announce to everyone that new life, life from God, was available to all who believe.

Recent events are creating a wasteland in us and around us. A financial crisis threatens our security, our jobs, this neighborhood, and the world. I don't know about you, but I've had to adjust my thinking about my human resources and whether the bottom line of my trust is God. Perhaps this crisis is also an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims
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The seasons of life can create a wilderness. I think I've told you the story, but let me repeat it. When Gloria and I were 46, we received a sudden and unexpected diagnosis. Gloria had kidney cancer, a type of cancer that is silent and usually fatal. We didn't know what lay ahead of us. It was a life and faith-shaking experience. With children still at home and the future utterly uncertain, we sat in a hospital room and tried to sort out our lives.

Gloria said something that day that I've never forgotten. She became the preacher and I was the congregation. "I'm sure glad I didn't wait until now to develop my faith," she said. She had a divine resource with the capacity to help us in the wilderness.

Is the Lord among us or not? That is always the question that lies behind all our questions.

I spent last weekend with my mother and brother. Mom just turned 90 and is a widow, something neither she nor any of us expected. She has heart disease and suffers the effects of a stroke which left her confined to a wheelchair.

She is doing great. In fact she told me a couple of weeks ago that she is very happy, happy almost all the time, she said. She told my brother the same thing.

I think I know why. For one thing she has friends at her assisted living facility. I arrived Saturday morning just in time for coffee and cookie hour. Mom was a center of attention as she introduced me to her friends. It is easy to see they all care for each other.

Sunday I went to church with Mom. It's a new congregation for her, just across the street from her home. The minister is a man she respects, he's good at his trade, and he knows her name. Several of her friends from the facility are members there, and they sit together in church.

Mom has a new electric wheelchair which has given her some independence. Several weeks ago she joined the church. It's a Baptist church, and the way you join the church is to go to the front of the church during the final hymn to present yourself for membership. They vote you in on the spot.

I can see Mom heading down the aisle in her wheelchair, wheeling it around at the front, and presenting herself as if to say, "I want to be one of you."

With those thoughts running through my mind, Mom and I took communion. I don't recall ever sitting with her during communion. We served each other the bread and wine and I think I saw a tear in her eye.

If she were here today I think she'd say, "I'm sure glad I didn't wait until now to develop a faith. Seventy years walking with God makes a difference. And I am sure glad I have friends in faith with whom to walk this part of my journey."

If she were here today and heard the question, "Is the Lord is with us or not," she'd smile and say, "You bet!"

Amen.

David C. Fisher, 2008