Is the Lord Among Us or Not?

EXODUS 17:1-7 (NRSVUE) ***From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. [2]The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" [3]But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" [4]So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." [5]The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. [6]I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. [7]He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"***
The Word of God for the people of God:

You can't blame the Children of Israel for being a bit irritated: they were thirsty! They were in the desert!

About noon on August 17, 2013, we left Oceanside, California where we were visiting Jo Lynn's sister and brother-in-law, and headed for our home in Las Vegas, Nevada. Once you pass Barstow it's basically 113 miles of Mojave Desert until you cross into Nevada at Primm, which is basically three large casino resorts with supporting hotels, restaurants and gas stations. There is a little oasis called Baker, about halfway between, with a Burger King, a Taco Bell, a couple of gas stations with convenience stores… oh, and the world's tallest thermometer. It's common to see the thermometer on your dashboard hitting 115 or higher in that area.

On that Saturday around Zzyzx Road, about halfway between Barstow and Baker, a pickup crossed the median and collided head-on with a tour bus. The California Highway Patrol Closed I-15 at Barstow and at Baker, but traffic already was backed up twenty miles in both directions. We were stuck for six hours. We were fortunate: we had a full tank of gas, our air conditioner functioned well, Jo Lynn had her Dr. Pepper from McDonald's, and we had bottles of water in the ice chest.

But we were in the desert, it was 115 degrees, and other people weren't as fortunate. There were cars off the pavement with steam erupting from under the hood, people trying to find shade under scrub vegetation, hiding behind cactus to "go potty"… What normally was a four-hour trip turned into a ten-hour ordeal, and there was a sense of desperation.

For the Children of Israel, it wasn't a few hours. They already had been in the desert—maybe weeks. That experience at the Red Sea alone had to have left an impression! Did the trauma of walking between walls of water leave a lingering terror? Or maybe the experience left them presumptuous: God's gonna' take care of us! We got it made in the shade!"

But there's no shade in the desert, and it's hot. Water supplies are

dangerously low. It's getting desperate. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

For many people, life's experiences of desperation aren't just a few hours. A fourteen-year-old girl disappears… last seen leaving school with some friends. She's usually home by 4:00 o'clock. It's 6:00 o'clock… 7:00 o'clock. Hours drag. Then hours become days. Weeks. Desperation. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

The witness of Scripture and of the history of the Judeo/Christian faith is that God always is among us. The human issue with God is amazingly simple: all we want is for God to be God the way we would be God if we were God; otherwise, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

But as long as we insist that God do things the way we think God ought to do things, we probably are going to miss God's presence and activity among us.

Of course, there are times, circumstances, and events that are beyond our control. Some things simply defy human understanding and explanation. And we have great difficulty accepting that.

Scot Peck's wonderful book, *The Road Less Traveled*, begins like this:

> "Life is difficult.
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> "This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.
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> "Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead, they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life *should* be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share.
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> "Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them? Do we want to teach our children to solve them?"

It's just easier, when we get desperate, to expect God to ride in like the Lone Ranger and rescue us. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

But God is by nature creator, redeemer, and sustainer, and we are created in that image. In most desperate situations, God already has done what God does. It's a matter of aligning our lives with the way God has provided.

See, here's the thing: in today's reading from Exodus, God didn't suddenly make water appear. The water already was there. God told Moses where to poke a hole in the ground…

Remember the story of the parting of the Red Sea? According to one Talmudic interpretation, God told Moses to hold his rod out over the sea, and when

Moses did that, nothing happened… until the first Israelite plunged into the water. *Then* the waters parted, and the people walked across on dry ground.

So, here's the *other* thing: while there are events beyond our control, the more medicine, psychiatry, and the social sciences learn about homo sapiens, the more we understand how much of our desperation is the result of our own choices and therefore is preventable and therefore should need no resolution.

Pop psychiatrist and radio personality, Dr. Laura Schlessinger, reports that most of the cases that come to her begin something like this: "I've messed up. I knew I was messing up when I did it, but I did it anyway. Now I've been caught. How can I avoid the consequences."

And even when we fail to make preventive choices, most of our problems can be resolved. See, here was Moses' secret: he already had been communicating with God on a regular basis. Remember that burning bush? Moses stayed in touch.

"*Well, I never had a burning bush!*"

Why do we need a burning bush? God already did that! We have the witness of that! Do we believe the witness, or not? Life becomes simpler and less stress-ful—we become more acutely aware of God's presence when, like Moses, we not only pray regularly, but accept that God, indeed, is among us, if in no other way than the divine image created within us. Most of us have untapped abilities.

Other ways God is present include medical science, psychiatric care, counsel-ling services. After all, it's God's creative genius that plants those abilities in the human brain. And, believe it or not, God also is present in a faith community—we call it "church." And when the church is true to its calling, yes, the Lord is among us.

It's just that God is not a genii that appears only when we rub the lamp; God is not the Lone Ranger who rides in only when we're in trouble. If we wait until we're in trouble to turn to God, we're facing an uphill battle.

I recall my grandmother's question: "If God seems far away, who moved?" The witness of 4,000 years of Judeo/Christian faith is that the Lord is among us. We can choose Isaiah's counsel: "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near…" (5:6) We can claim Jesus' promise: "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." (7:7)

For those who still struggle with the discipline, maybe the place to start is the almost trite "Serenity Prayer:" God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. When we do that, we can know, "The Lord is, indeed, among us."

Pastoral Prayer

Eternal and ever-present God, the Psalmist asked, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" (Ps. 139:7). We know, somehow, that you are the One in whom our souls find refuge. You are Immanuel, your name is "God with us," and yet, our awareness is not always attuned to your presence.

As we prepare to walk through the hours and days ahead, days filled with to-do lists and tasks that require effort and attention, grant us grace to sense your nearness. Open each soul to become more aware of Your presence throughout each day, and help us trust that You are present, even when we struggle to feel so.

Teach us to see each busy day not as an obstacle blocking intimacy with You, but as holy ground upon which You will stand with us. Slow our spirits so we may walk in step with You. Slow our minds so we can discover those moments we can simply rest in you and find peace in your presence. And in that peace, we become the people you created us to be.

Amen.

Invitation to the Table

One of the things that divides Christians is the different ideas about what happens at this table. Some are very rigid in their insistence that once the bread and wine are blessed, the substance changes and they become, literally, the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation). Others are adamant that the sacraments, once blessed, coexist with the body and blood of Christ. There's hair-splitting over substance versus essence, and the word, sacrament is applied in a variety of ways across denominational lines.

Some call it a sacrament; some call it the Eucharist; some call it communion or the Lord's Supper. Our most common description is simply "The Table," or "The Table of the Lord."

For us, it is primarily a table of remembrance. For us, it is not so much the loaf and the cup as it is the event of sharing and remembering that projects the awareness of a Holy Presence. For us, Christ is made known in an event—a happening: and it begins with the breaking of bread.