

Exodus 17:1-7
1 John 3:16-24

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Is the Lord Among Us or Not?

[Moses called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" *Exodus 17:7*

"Is the Lord among us or not?"

This past week I watched a compelling documentary on the evacuation of British and French forces from Dunkirk in May of 1940. It was an event marked by two of the most extraordinary twists of fortune that derailed the almost total annihilation of the bulk of the British Army and much of the French, enabling a wildly successful evacuation across the Channel by a makeshift armada of almost comical proportions, were it not so courageous. What also intrigued me was that it was aired on the Weather Channel in a nightly series on how weather has miraculously changed the course of history. The next night featured the Battle of the Bulge of 1944-45.

The first Dunkirk miracle was the few days of millpond calm in early May, a month known for its ferocious storms in the narrow English Channel. And in that calm, low clouds and sea fog enabled a miracle armada of almost 900 small vessels from pleasure crafts to fishing boats to large destroyers to save 330,000 ration-less troops on the Dunkirk beach with their backs to the sea. The second was an action by the beloved King George VI who, with the troops backed up to the beach, called the nation to prayer. Neville Chamberlain, the ineffectual and ill outgoing Prime Minister, wondered out loud what possible effect that could have. But Hitler, otherwise unaccountably, and in contradiction of all traditional military strategy, stopped the advance of his own troops for three days. Churchill had become Prime Minister that same month in a moment of supreme testing. There must have been a hundred thousand prayerful cries on that beach as the days wore on, wondering, "Is the Lord among us or not?" And then, after eight days, came their salvation from certain death.

To mention Churchill and Moses in the same breath is no small compliment to either leader. Moses found himself in no less of a crisis in the desert of Sinai with perhaps 30–50,000 men women and children facing starvation and extreme thirst. Fearing that they are close to stoning him for false promises of deliverance, Moses pleads with God for help. God tells Moses to choose a few of the elders of Israel, and to go on ahead of the people to Mt. Sinai (here called Horeb), where God will be standing on the mountain. This Moses did, striking the rock of the mountain as God commanded, and the elders witnessed it.

Significantly the people did not witness this event. They just benefit from the miraculous stream of life-giving water when they arrive at the mountain. The leaders, however, see it first hand. The leadership of your church is always called to a higher level of discipline and commitment from which faithfulness the congregation ultimately benefits through a sort of spiritual osmosis. Like Moses and the elders going ahead, our leaders often have intimate access to the grace of God in action through, for example, their countless hours of preparation for each Supper at St. John's and the ALPHA program. Take their experience of God's faithfulness through their countless hours of preparation for each ALPHA program and Supper at St. John's. You then arrive to tables beautifully set and flowers arranged, food prepared, plated and served, each movie cued and ready, each table leader primed and ready. Their faithfulness, their access to the larger picture of God's grace thus serves to you as another invitation to embrace what they have already experienced, the loving and providential hand of God.

This going ahead of the congregation can be a two edged sword. Moses' facing Pharaoh down through the twelve plagues that led Pharaoh finally to capitulate and let them go, was a blockbuster series of miracles with little cost to the Israelite slaves. The crossing of the sea and then the desert took courage, but they were provided for. When one series of spectacular events follows another, it's not too surprising to find the people

picturing a very utilitarian God, one who does all the redemptive work. So when the food and water run out, the impulse is not to search personally after the God at the heart of each act of providing, but to say to the leaders, what has this God of yours done for me recently. A God, as Walter Brueggemann puts it, who is viewed as “commensurate with human prosperity.” I confess a certain soft spot for Joel Osteen, the young T.V. evangelist, yet I do wince when I sense him pointing his people to a God who provides with so little cost or expectation beyond good feelings.

The people of Israel did not get to the promised land until they had cycled through two generations dying in the wilderness, learning how to be a people under God; how to prepare their children and their grandchildren.

It’s only when we no longer feel the need to ask “Is the Lord among us or not?” that we move implicitly from being led to leading.

- 91 year-old Bishop Aloysius Jin, the Catholic Bishop whom we met in China last April, spent, you may recall, 27 years in a Chinese jail for being a Christian, 8 of those in solitary confinement. He somehow learned the Gospel of John by heart and prayed it verse by verse every day through those 10,000 days, praying silently because the turn-keys forbade him to pray (he used to move his lips). “I almost lost my hope,” he told us. “I thought I would die there.” He had times of great despondency, long wilderness periods when perhaps he wondered, “Is the Lord among us or not?” The head jailer assured him he would die in prison. The jailer eventually died in office, but the good bishop survived. Prayer was his lifeline, not to a hoped for God, but to a God who he knew and experienced as his living lifeline. He has become a living icon for the resurgence of a vibrant living Catholic faith in China.
- Like Bishop Jin, Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in jail for so-called crimes against the state, much of it in hard labor on Robben Island. His faith persevered because he knew that to let go of that rope to God was to fall into despair and death. To linger with the question “Is the Lord among us or not?” would, we now know, have been to deny the world one of the most beloved and influential figures of the past century. Who could have imagined that 27 years in a depraved system would enable a black man to emerge as the first democratically elected President of his country, and second black man in a decade from South Africa to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

It is difficult to imagine John McCain, the downed Navy pilot in the Vietnam War surviving five and a half years of isolation, torture and beatings in a North Vietnamese POW camp, were not for his daily trust in God and—hard as it is to believe under such wretched circumstances, he *did not find God wanting*. Indeed it would be hard not to allow him asking “Is the Lord among us or not?”—under such circumstances.

Yesterday I read again, after many years Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” a letter written to a group of white clergy who largely condemned him for leading a passive march to Birmingham seeking to redress the plight of black people in that city. Toward the end of its eleven single spaced pages, he writes, almost apologetically:

Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

There’s no room there for lingering doubts. Faith in Christ seldom does well, seldom really thrives “on beds of ease” as Amos put it. Doubts are, ironically, the stepping stones of faith when challenged and worked through, rather than the limp dismissal of a God who does not stand up well to selfish expectations.

On one occasion several years ago Mother Teresa was lecturing at an American university. She told of her religious “social work” among the poor of Calcutta where she brings love, joy and hope to the sad and hopeless. During the question-and-answer session that followed, a young man studying to be a social worker thanked her for her talk and the transforming work she and her community contribute to the poor of Calcutta and the world.

“But,” he continued, “I am bothered by your constant references to Jesus. We live in a pluralistic, even secular world. I want to do the work you do, but I don’t want to do it with Jesus.”

“How old are you?” Mother Teresa asked.

“Twenty-one,” the student answered.

“I’m seventy-six,” Mother Teresa said. “When you are as old as I am and have done what I have done, you come and tell me how you’ve done this work without Jesus.”

Is the Lord among us . . . or what!

Amen