

Is God Among us or Not?
Exodus 17:1-7
By Rev. Ridgley Joyner
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Last Wednesday after Supper at St. John's, I started to feel like I was fighting off something, so when I got home and immediately climbed into bed and was fast asleep by 9pm. At 6:30am I woke up with the sun and the tides had changed-I felt so great! And what should I do with all this time? A hike? Read in my armchair? Enjoy slowly sipping a hot cup of tea? Mornings are my favorite, and this Thursday morning presented endless opportunities to glide into my day. Seamus's head popped up over the bed and he greeted me at my bedside wagging his tail. In that moment, I knew what he was saying. We were long overdue for one of our long morning walks. I threw on my shoes and a sweatshirt and stumbled outside my apartment, rushing to lock it to catch up with Seamus who was already down the hall excitedly hopping around. We started our walk down along the riverbanks taking in the crisp fall morning air, and basking in the warmth of the morning sun. *sigh* this was the *perfect* morning. Seamus galloped along the path smelling all the freshly fallen leaves and playfully pouncing.

At the tail end of our walk, we approached Seamus's favorite part of the walk...and my least favorite—the path goes alongside a section of trees that is what we residents call the “swampy abyss” and the resident dog's kryptonite. Smells galore. An adventure. New places to explore. Dogs notoriously run into this small patch of woods and come out on their terms, as happy as can be, but usually COVERED in muddy silt and skunk smells. Seamus ran over the crest of trees and looked at me. I said “SEAMUS! Don't do it! Come! NOW!” Before I could say his name one more time, he had already bolted into the swampy abyss.

After a good amount of yelling, Seamus comes storming out with the BIGGEST smile on his face COVERED in mud. COVERED!

I clipped his leash on and gave him a stern talking to as if he knew exactly what I was saying. The real reason why this swampy abyss is our least favorite is that we in an apartment complex don't have hoses outside. I tried to wipe at least some of the mud off of him as we walked into the elevator, me still murmuring under my breath, now also muddy by association. I resign myself to my kitchen floor being dirty as we make our way to the bathroom. Seamus hops in the tub and I lean over to turn on the faucet and PAUSE nothing comes out. I paused in that moment and remembered the blinking voicemail from the apartment complex on my phone. I was so tired on Wednesday that I forgot to listen to my voicemail from a missed call during supper. And that voicemail was Will the maintenance man telling me my water heater broke and was leaking. No water until Thursday afternoon.

I won't bore you with the details, but I will say Seamus made sure my “early morning” was spent all on him. Apart from the no morning shower thing, I quickly realized how annoying mud everywhere can be, and how central water was to my daily routine that day. I could NOT stop

thinking about one thing. How on earth have people been doing this in Western North Carolina for two whole weeks?

There are many things about Hurricane Helene that are devastating, but the mudslides and high winds left those living in the area without electricity to pump the water out of wells, water treatment plants that were damaged, and roads washed out leaving water piping systems failing. The loss of water was extensive to the region. We keep hearing about Asheville, but the area affected extends a hundred miles beyond simply Asheville. One of the first things people needed and needed quickly the morning after Helene hit was water. I can't imagine being faced with the destruction they are dealing with, and doing so without a necessity as simple as water.

It certainly gives me perspective as we read this morning's scripture. Our passage tells us of an account where God's people are parched. The very place they have ventured into has become the wilderness in more ways than one. It is easy for us to read this story and know that they're thirsty, but rarely do I feel like we can experience the desperation they felt. Certainly desperate enough to look back on their time enslaved by Pharaoh nostalgically.

The Israelites are surrounded by scarcity of resources and also the abundance of God's mercy yet they're yearning for more—Chapter 16 shares that the Israelite community was not only fed Manna and Quail in the wilderness but also that they continued to eat until they reached the border of Canaan. Which means that God more than provided for them. They haven't yet been given the 10 commandments and the covenant on Sinai has not happened either—so this wilderness time between deliverance and Sinai is a time of deep identity exploration. They are discovering what it means to become God's people.

In Ancient Near Eastern culture, there were many Gods—it was common to worship numerous Gods, especially if it meant you had your needs met. So this God who has delivered them through Moses---this God who is “supposedly” taking them to the Promised Land—it was a huge leap of trust for them—and a lot of it hinged on what Moses was saying to them.

The Israelites are leaning on Moses and God's guidance, UNTIL we hear that they are thirsty. That seems to be when the buck stops. The terrain between the wilderness of sin and the wilderness of Sinai was rocky with lots of peaks and valleys. Their exodus from Egypt was a huge commitment and we quickly see the situation crumbling.

We know they have recent, vivid memories of the miraculous presence of God who saves them through the plagues and rescues them from Pharaoh's army as the waters are split open for their escape across. They have been led by the pillar of fire and even receive manna and quail to fill their stomachs. So these Israelites, they have each experienced the work of God first hand in the darkest of circumstances.

Yet they are so focused on the fact that they are thirsty they forget all of this.

This experience is not limited to people of faith in scripture. It is so common for us to be surrounded by all the pain, suffering and hate in the world and ask—is God in this? How could God let something like this be? How could God be gracious enough to deliver people, and then leave them thirsting the desert? Is God among us or what? Lament ensues.

The Israelites are berating and blaming Moses—and Moses turns to God. As God once heard his peoples cry in Egypt, he still hears. God directs Moses to take the elders to a rock at Horeb. As Moses obediently strikes the rock with the staff he split the Nile with, God brings the unthinkable into fruition. Water. From a rock. Water flows and those who thirst feast on the provision of God. Moses names this place Meribah to mark where they were asking “Is the lord among us or not?”

I don’t know about you, but this fall has felt heavy. It has been filled with grief and heartache. From hurricanes, the hurtful words spat at one another (as apparently one does during election season), to losing loved ones far too early, to burned out loved ones, to unwanted diagnoses. It is enough to ask “is God among us?”. I can’t help but notice the beauty and pain of the world because this heaviness has been met with comradery, support, joyful surprise. To find such beauty in the heartbreak of the world is about as paradoxical as water springing forth from a rock.

I have been glued to social media recently. I don’t love it. But what I have loved is the firsthand accounts of friends who are seeing the pervasive devastation in Western North Carolina and East Tennessee, yet weeping with the ways that humans have shown up for one another. A friend posted the other day that the trauma that Hurricane Helene invited reminds them that storing up things for when a crisis happens does nothing. Turns out when you lose everything, you are reminded just how much you have—relational capital. When your home is gone, a stranger coming by with a chainsaw and warm plate of biscuits and gravy with coffee is the type of thing that redeems your hope in God and humanity.

I personally have been so amazed at the ways churches have stepped up lately. Just this week I read an article about a Baptist church in the rural high country of NC near Boone. Just last month they were asking themselves about a month ago whether the community would even notice if they suddenly ceased to exist. A mere 4 weeks later, they are serving hot meals, handing out provisions and literally being the hands and feet of Christ. Is the church thriving according to the world’s standards? Are their pews full? Are children filling their Sunday school rooms? Is everything back to the way it was in the 90s? Not at all. But the church is doing the *literal* work Jesus called them to—to be the hands of Christ to a world of hurting people in desperate need of the love and provision of God, in desperate need of hope.

Water mission international is a Christian nonprofit based in Charleston SC that focuses on engineering clean water infrastructure to towns in Africa who literally spend their days walking miles for water. When Helene hit and damaged WNC’s water sources, Water Mission got to work using their technology in the mountains to bring much needed sustenance to a region deprived of the very thing that keeps you alive.

Even locally at St. John's, hope prevails in the face of devastation when members drop everything to collect blankets and drive 10 plus hours in a day to deliver them to families in need. When people find time in their busy weeks to buy supplies and fill buckets and hygiene kits. On Friday I drove a U-Haul full of clean up buckets and hygiene kits from the Donegal presbytery that were assembled with two weeks' notice. The U-Haul's destination was in the middle of the country about 30 miles from Baltimore. As I unloaded buckets the staff at the Brethren center shared with me the work they do.

Lutheran World Relief and Church World Service have a hub in New Windsor to distribute to those in need. They gave me a tour of the warehouse while I was there and showed me how they pack and seal blankets from church blanket drives, pallets of buckets, rooms where hygiene kits are assembled, weighed and boxed up. The railroad tracks behind the warehouse drop off containers full of donations. This warehouse was HUGE and FULL of school supplies, hygiene supplies, blankets and clean up buckets.

They showed me the empty shelves of clean up buckets and how grateful they were for our donations. They shared about how thousands of buckets have been leaving their facility recently. I don't like WHY those buckets are leaving the warehouse, but seeing such a tangible example of God's love gave me hope. That when it may look like the world is parched, God's mercy flows as abundantly as I'd imagine the water flowed from that rock at Meribah.

Yes, this Fall has been heavy. This fall has felt like hope is hard to find. But, God has reminded me to sit with the joy and the sorrow. In the moments between the thirst of Israelites and the abundance of water flowing from a rock of all places. In the picture of a sanctuary full of diapers and food and blankets. In a God who provides for us even while we are asking "Is God among us or not?"

One of my professors in seminary would always say that it is in the wilderness that we are closer to God than ever---that we are surrounded by an abundance of God's provision when we actually feel like we are alone in a land scarce of God's grace.

Is God among us or not? I'll let you answer that question.