

“Is the Lord among Us or Not?”

In the name of him who gives us living water, dear friends in Christ: In our midweek Lenten services, we’ve been following the progression of the Israelites as they journey from Egypt to the Promised Land through the desert. As a matter of fact, today’s Old Testament reading about Moses striking the rock at Horeb to bring forth water is one that we covered a few weeks back. I won’t address it again in detail, but I do want to highlight one thing the people say while they are grumbling about the lack of water at their new campsite. They ask this incredible question, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

You know, sometimes, to encourage their students’ curiosity, teachers will say that there is no such thing as a stupid question. It’s not true. I teach 7th and 8th grade religion over at the Lutheran school. Once one of my bright lights raised his hand and asked if in Old Testament times the Israelites celebrated Christmas. I could have shown him the fatal flaw in his thinking by asking if he celebrated his great grandson’s birthday; but I confess I didn’t. Instead I answered yes, of course they celebrated Christmas; but that for them it was more of a patriotic holiday, so they did it on the Fourth of July by shooting off fireworks. The sad thing is that he was perfectly satisfied with that answer. I had to tell him I was joking. My point is that yes, there are stupid questions. And the one that was being asked by the Israelites really wins the prize. I mean c’mon: six weeks prior to this they were slaves in Egypt. They all saw the Lord’s mighty hand afflicting their oppressors with ten devastating plagues. The Pharaoh who said he’d never release them ended up begging them to leave. The people of Egypt weighed them down with gold and gems which they handed over saying, “Please, take this and go, or your God will surely kill us all!” Israel, a nation of slaves, went marching out of Egypt like conquering heroes. It was the Lord’s doing. They all knew it.

Later, when the Pharaoh changed his mind, and they were caught between the pursuing chariots and the Red Sea, the ocean miraculously opened before them. The Lord himself, in the form of a cloud, positioned himself between the fleeing Israelites and the Egyptian army. All night long he gave impenetrable darkness to the charioteers on one side and light to his people on the other. Then at dawn, when they were all safely on the other side, he lifted the cloud and allowed the chariots to move forward, drawing them into a trap. They all drowned as walls of water fell on them.

That’s not all. This very morning, before beginning the day’s march, they stuffed themselves with bread the Lord provided for them. As they have ever since the food they packed in Egypt ran out, they woke to find a white layer of manna lying on the ground. They scooped it up in baskets and have been munching on it all day. If this is not evidence of the Lord’s ongoing presence and care, I don’t know what it is. But most obviously, the Lord has been leading the way. He’s made himself continuously visible to them. He appears as cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He shades them from the heat of the sun and he gives them light by night. Yet they have the temerity to ask, “Is the Lord among us or not?” How foolish can you be? Open your eyes. Look up. He’s right there. Of course he’s among us! And yet they question it.

But then, maybe we shouldn’t be so critical of them, for who here in the midst of a crisis or seemingly insurmountable problem hasn’t wondered the same thing? “I’m suffering. I’m in need. I’m terribly sad or frightened. I’m desperate. Lord, where are you?”

We hear this often from unbelievers. It's one of the "proofs" they present for their lack of faith. If God is good, then why does he allow bad things to happen? When there's a tornado that destroys a town or some other natural disaster, unbelieving news reporters love nothing better than to find clergy who are attempting to console victims so they can ask them, "Where is God in all this?" They ask the question with a sneer, thinking it's the final nail in the coffin of Christianity. Nothing could be further from the truth; although sadly, it often happens that pastors who answer the question don't do a very good job of giving a biblical response.

The mistake is mankind's continuing attempt to find God in circumstances. It's to confuse what we see and experience in the fallen world around us with the Lord against whom the world is in rebellion. For the unbeliever, that bad things happen is proof that there is no God. For believers who are suffering, that bad things happen is taken as evidence that the Lord has abandoned us, or hates us, or doesn't care about us – something along those lines.

But what does the Scripture say? Two weeks ago we had as our Old Testament lesson the account of mankind's fall. We heard how our first parents sinned against the Lord, and how they fled from his presence. But he called them back to himself. He promised them a Savior. He covered their shame. *And* he said there would be unpleasant consequences. Their lot would be pain, hardship, futile toil, thorns and thistles, and ultimately death. "You wanted to see what it's like to live in rebellion against me? Okay, I'll show you. I'll let you have a taste of it. We'll see how you like it." That evil in the world is not evidence that there is no God or that he doesn't care, it's evidence that the world is under God's curse because of mankind's rebellion. It's proof that there is a God and that he does care—cares enough to ensure that we don't remain happy and satisfied in our sinful condition, because that would lead to our everlasting separation from the Lord and our eternal damnation.

The parable of the prodigal son comes to mind. As long as the wayward boy was living fat off his father's money, he could sin to his heart's content. It was only when the cash ran out and times were hard that he realized how good he had it at home. And upon his return, he discovered just how much his father loved him in spite of the hateful way he'd treated his dad. So it is with us: the Lord allows trials and tribulations to come into our lives precisely so that won't be comfortable in our sin and rebellion. He wants us to return to him, to seek him where he makes his presence known, so that there he can embrace us with his forgiveness and love.

For the Israelites in the desert, the Lord appeared as a cloud. He was right there in plain view. Instead of asking, "Where is he now that we need him?" they should have been directing their prayers to him. "Lord, we're out of water. Please give us some. Amen." That would have been the faithful thing to do. But no; they pitched a fit. They went into rebellion mode. They threatened to kill God's prophet. Yet, amazingly, despite all this, the Lord in his infinitely forgiving love gave them water anyway. He had Moses strike the rock, and he let his people drink.

He has done the same for us, as St. Paul tells us in today's Epistle. "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly ... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Understand what he's saying: If you ever have cause to question the Lord's gracious care for you, if the conditions of your life make you wonder if he's left you, or stopped loving you, or that he's forgotten you, or that somehow he's enjoying seeing you suffer, then you're not looking at things correctly. You're attempting to find God in circumstances rather than where he reveals himself.

He reveals himself and his true thoughts and attitudes toward you in the most unexpected of places: not in a cloud or pillar of fire, but on a cross. There we see mankind's

rebellion against God in all its raving fury, gleefully torturing and murdering the Lord of glory. And there we see the Lord's great love and compassion as the Son of God bears the guilt and penalty of our sin. He is the Rock that is stricken with the rod of God's Law that we might drink the living water and have eternal life.

And because you can't go back to the cross to watch what happened there, he brings the cross and its benefits to you where you can see them. He does it through the ministry of his church. There the Lord reveals himself to you in the written and preached Word. There he shows himself to you in the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion. By these means he gives you his Holy Spirit to enable you to believe what Christ has done for you, so that you can know for certain that you stand in his righteousness before the Lord. It's a righteousness not of your doing, but that is imputed to you by faith. It's the righteousness of Christ. And through it, you have peace with God. He's not your enemy. He's on your side. You have never to doubt his love or ongoing care.

Quite the contrary: now you can see what unbelievers can't see. You see that God does not reveal himself in circumstances; rather that circumstances, and in particular those we would call evil, are used by the Lord to draw people back to him where he is found. And this is why Paul can go on to say that we rejoice in our sufferings. God allows bad things to happen to us for good reasons. Paul goes on to enumerate some of them. First, he says, suffering produces endurance. Muscles that never get exercised become weak and atrophied. The same is true of faith. Strong faith, the kind that endures, has to experience hardship to endure through. Endurance what was the Israelites showed none of. The moment they were inconvenienced, they screamed like a child in the terrible twos. Endurance would have allowed them to think, "The Lord led us here; he must have a plan to take care of us. We'll just have to wait and see."

Paul goes on: "Endurance produces character." He means the kinds of character virtues we admire. People learn to be generous with God's gifts because they know what it's like to go without. People learn to comfort those who mourn because they've suffered the loss of loved ones themselves. We learn to be kind and compassionate because we've had to endure hatred and rejection. We can only learn to forgive by being sinned against. The best qualities we come to possess are forged in the fires of adversity.

Finally, Paul says, character produces hope. Here he's directing us to the promised end of our faith: the day when Christ returns, the dead are raised, and the living changed to possess incorruptible bodies. Then our Christian characters will be perfected – no longer flawed and deficient as they are now. Our hope is for the day when all the evil and suffering of this world will be history and we will live as God intended for us in perfect peace, harmony, and righteousness. We long for it because we don't have it now; but we know we will. This is our hope. And this hope is nothing to be ashamed of. When the world around us tells us that it's a pie in the sky dream, we know better. We've seen what God has done for us in Christ. We've experienced the joy of his divine love. We know what the Lord is doing now. And we know what he has promised. Therefore when trouble comes, we don't need to ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" We know that in any and every circumstance, he is leading us by his Word and Spirit to his eternal Promised Land. And he who began us on this journey will certainly bring us to its completion through our Savior. Therefore let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!