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The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Exodus 17:1-7



“Is the Lord among us or not?” Is God here with us or not? This is always the question, isn’t it? It was the question plaguing the ancient Israelites: slavery in Egypt was certainly no tea party, and they were surely grateful to God for their sudden and miraculous rescue, but now the people are out in the desert, and they’re dusty and dirty and hungry and thirsty, and they’re wondering, “God, what have you done for us lately? We appreciate the release from slavery, but now what? have you now abandoned us? are you still with us, still among us?”

This was also the question troubling the chief priests and Jewish elders who, perplexed by Jesus’ words and deeds, ask him by what authority he is operating: “Who has authorized you to speak and act like this?” they want to know. In other words, “is your teaching from God or not? Do we meet God through you? Is God with you, Jesus, or are you just improvising?”

And this too is very often the question lurking in the back of many of our own minds: “are you actually here God or not? Is God really among us, with us, with me? Can I really count on you, God, or are all these Bible stories just pious fictions, feel-good fairy tales that we keep telling in order to make life a little more pleasant but that finally vanish into thin air, ultimately collapse like a house of cards?” As the ancient Israelites knew only too well, there’s nothing like time out in the desert—a period of real hardship and suffering—to snap us quickly back to reality and force us to come to grips with what we can really rely on, what we can truly trust, what is bedrock and what is sand in those times of life when everything is crumbling around us.

Countless individuals over the centuries have known God’s reliable presence as an unshakeable bedrock, especially when life starts to crumble. A particularly powerful example is provided by the Austrian Jewish psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, whose autobiography, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, became a bestselling account of Frankl’s horrific and heroic struggle to survive as a Jew amidst the Holocaust. Frankl recounts how in 1942, at age 37, while serving as head of the department of neurology at a hospital in Vienna, he along with all of his family members were arrested and shipped off to a concentration camp. Not realizing the mortal danger, Frankl initially worried that his psychiatric research, work to which he had devoted his entire professional life, might be lost or destroyed, and so he stitched the partially completed pages of a book he was writing into the lining of his overcoat. Eventually Frankl arrived at Auschwitz, where he immediately was stripped of all his clothing, losing his most precious research in the process. Devastated by this sudden ruin of his life’s work, Frankl would later write: “I had to undergo and overcome the loss of my spiritual child. Now it seemed as if nothing and no one would survive me; neither a physical nor a spiritual child of my own! I found myself confronted with the question of whether under such circumstances my life was ultimately void of

any meaning. I had to surrender my clothes,” continues Frankl, “and instead inherit the worn-out rags of an inmate who had been sent to the gas chamber.” But as Frankl slipped on those tattered rags, to his great surprise he noticed a crumpled slip of paper hidden deep within a tiny pocket. Pulling it out, Frankl recounts his astonishment at “finding in the pocket of the newly acquired coat a single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, which contained the main Jewish prayer, SHEMA YISRAEL (Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.) How should I have interpreted such a ‘coincidence,’” continues Frankl, “other than as a challenge to live out my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?” Astounded by a divine encounter in the darkest of circumstances, Frankl used this divine surprise—meeting God with him literally in the pocket of his tattered rags—as a challenge and a catalyst to survive three impossible years in camps like Auschwitz. Now, I do not deny that this divine “coincidence” raises as many questions as it answers: “why wasn’t every inmate given a page of the prayer book?,” we might well wonder. That’s a very reasonable yet impossible question to answer; I don’t know, Frankl doesn’t know, nobody knows. But just as we don’t know the direct answer to that question, we also don’t know that other inmates weren’t given something—the melody of a song whistled by another prisoner, a calming memory from childhood whispered within one’s heart—something that provided hope and reassurance that God was there, present, with the suffering and the dying even when all hope seemed lost.

God showed up to help Viktor Frankl just like God arrived to help the thirsty, grumbling Israelites, not in what we might consider a logical or rational way but instead by working in ways no one would have anticipated, whether through a prayer printed on a crumpled piece of paper or by causing water to gush forth from a parched desert rock.

Centuries after the Israelites grumbled in the desert, early Christians like the Apostle Paul would identify God’s miraculous water-giving rock with Christ himself. In 1 Corinthians 10, for example, Paul writes plainly that “the rock [in the wilderness] was Christ.” What might Paul mean by drawing this connection between the rock which gives miraculous water and Jesus Christ? I think Paul’s point has everything to do with that fundamental question, “Is the Lord among us or not?” In his interpretation of the rock as Christ, I hear Paul saying that Jesus Christ, our “Immanuel,” literally “God with us,” “God among us,” is a bedrock of hope. For desperate travelers dying of thirst in the desert, Christ comes through, answering their cries in a miraculous way they never could have logically anticipated. “Is the Lord among us?” “Yes,” Paul says, “but often when you least expect it

and in ways you never could have imagined.”

And God’s unexpected, miraculous presence comes through as well in our Gospel reading as Christ, Immanuel, “God with us,” responds to challenges about his own authority by inviting the religious experts of his day to look at things differently, to open their eyes and find God among “the tax collectors and prostitutes”—those uncouth, immoral folks assumed to be the least likely to have God in their midst. “Is the Lord among us?,” the religious experts ask. “Yes,” Jesus replies, “but when you look for him, don’t be surprised when you find him among the ‘least likely’ of people.”

And in our own lives, Christ, God with us, responds to our own questions about where God is at, whether God is really among us, by again working, often behind the scenes, in ways we could never imagine, inviting us—like the elders of Jesus’ day—to open our hearts a little bit wider, to make room in our busy lives to listen, watch, slow down, and pay attention to how God is at work as an unbreakable bedrock for us—and among us—each and every day, especially when tough times come and all else crumbles.

How might we recognize the Lord’s presence among us? There are dozens of ways, but just a few brief ideas:

1. In a few moments we are going to celebrate the Eucharist together. As you come to receive the bread and wine, reflect on Christ walking with you, moving amidst this community as we celebrate him together. Then, in taking the elements, feel Christ in your hand, on your tongue, in your body, and in your heart.

2. Come back to church at some point during the week, whether Sunday nights for Breath-Move-Pray, Wednesdays for centering prayer, or come to men’s or women’s Bible study, or any of the other offerings going on each week. Let this community be a place where you find refreshment during the week, where you take a renewing midweek drink of spiritual water to sustain you along the journey.

3. Adopt a new spiritual practice or commit more deeply to one you already have. Maybe it’s a time of prayer in the morning, or fasting from one Patriots game a month, or scheduling a badly needed weekend retreat at a religious center like the SSJE monastery in Cambridge.

These are just a few ideas. In whatever ways work best for you, allow the eyes and ears of your heart to be opened, so that when the question comes up “Is the Lord really here? Is the Lord among us or not?,” you can confidently say “Yes, I know God is with us, I know Christ is with me. He is the unbreakable bedrock of life, both now and eternally.” Amen.