

“Is the Lord among Us or Not?”
delivered Sunday, March 27, 2011
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Exodus 17:1-7

That question, murmured so long ago among those ancient Israelites – “Is the Lord among us or not?” – seems to echo through the corridors of time as the question being asked today in many and various ways. “What is going on in the world?” some of you have pondered aloud with me, and I admit I’ve wondered myself what God might be up to these days. I noticed the question in the grocery store the other day. I was standing there in the check out line, and glancing, as you do, at the magazine covers about Charlie Sheen’s meltdown, and who could be designing the royal wedding dress, and how to lose ten pounds before summer, and then I saw it – “Apocalypse Now” was spread across the cover of *Newsweek* in bold red letters: Tsunamis. Earthquakes. Nuclear Meltdowns. Revolutions. Economies on the Brink... What’s next?

It is the same question, albeit framed differently, that the people of Israel were mumbling among themselves. “How can it get any worse than this? Is the Lord among us or not?” If God is all powerful, if God is all loving, then how can we explain the suffering people are experiencing today in our world? In the face of human suffering, like the terrible devastation in Japan, Christian theology has evolved in the way it has answered this question. Let’s look back a few hundred years to consider what it is we believe about God’s presence in the midst of a major human crisis, and how that may have changed over time. There was a time when people found comfort in believing that no matter what happened, even when bad things happened to good people, there was some purposeful hand of God in the mix. Five hundred years ago, that’s what our Presbyterian theological forebear, John Calvin, would have said. Calvin studied the scriptures about the providence of God, and he looked at the presence of good and evil in the world, and it comforted him to believe that if God is sovereign in all things, then God must also allow for terrible things to happen. Calvin wrote: “Believers comfort themselves with the solace that they suffer nothing except by God’s ordinance and command, for they are under his hand.” (1)

There are some folks who are still comforted by this notion that human suffering is actually caused by the hand of God, but with the Age

of the Enlightenment and new scientific discoveries, a couple of centuries after Calvin, theological understanding about the natural world also developed and changed. Two hundred years after Calvin wrote those words something happened in Europe that had a huge impact on the Christian understanding of suffering. It was the first of November, 1755. A traveling merchant wrote in his diary, "Never had there been a finer morning... not a cloud in the sky and absolutely no warning of the terror to come. The merchant was traveling in Lisbon which boasted a population of 275,000; and fully ten percent of the city's population were monks, priests or nuns. The city was recognized for its piety in all of Europe. It was All Saints Day and at 9:30 in the morning just about the whole town was in worship, when plates under the ocean floor shifted, creating dramatic tremors in the city. The shaking lasted ten minutes. The cathedrals, packed with those offering their prayers, began to crumble, killing many in the act of worship. Fires, resulting from falling candles and cooking fires, raged like an apocalyptic force through the city.

It is reported that the church known as the Patriarchal survived the earthquake. Taken as a sign of God's generous providence, people gathered there as if under the shelter of his wing, but the fires chased them from their place of refuge. Those who could navigate their way through the debris in the streets to the harbor. Then it was there that the sea rose up and swallowed them, dragging thousands to death. Not only one of Europe's largest cities, but one of her most publicly faithful Christian cities was virtually destroyed by earthquake, fire and tsunami. People began to ask the question anew. Was this at God's hand?

Now partnered with a new philosophical mindset of the 18th century Enlightenment, the theological underpinnings of the Providence of God shifted with that earthquake and tsunami that consumed Lisbon. Philosopher and historian Susan Neiman has written that after Lisbon, "God's hand as the cause of every disaster no longer made sense." (2) People began to look – not only at science – but also at scripture with new understanding. If God allowed human beings much freedom in creation, they reasoned, then God must have also unleashed freedom in the powers of nature as well.

The writings of the Apostle Paul affirm this. Paul uses words for unseen powers to give voice to the inexplicable forces of nature – words like "powers," "authorities," "rulers," "demons," "spirits," "thrones" and "dominions." Further, what Paul affirms above all else, is that while these

unseen, and often destructive, powers exist in the world, not one of them can separate us from the love of God. God may allow for the free forces of nature to have their way, but ultimately God does not leave us abandoned. God's love for us will trump all other powers, even the power of death.

Which brings us to our story this morning from the Book of Exodus. The people of Israel have been on a remarkable journey. After generations of slavery in Egypt, they were led through the Red Sea toward the Promised Land, but an intervening forty years found them wandering in the wilderness, their faith being tested at every turn. In today's scripture reading they are complaining because they don't have water. They are dying of thirst and start haranguing their leader Moses. "Why did you bring us out here only to let us perish?" "Why are you quarreling with me?" Moses said as if to say, "Take it up with the Lord who is the One who got us into this mess." But their grumbling got the best of him, so Moses gave in and went to God asking, "What should I do with these complaining people, Lord? They are about to stone me to death!" God gives Moses specific directions. "Take a few of the elders, get your staff that you used to part the Nile, strike it on that rock, and water will come out of it." Moses did what God instructed, and the water did come, and the people quenched their thirst.

The remarkable part of this story is what happened next. They named the place where this miracle happened, but what did they call it? You might think that Israel would choose to name the place "Great Rock" to memorialize the rock from which the water flowed as testimony to the power of God; Or "Living Water" to remember the miracle of the water provided in the desert; Or "Bubbling Springs... or "Abundant Grace" or "God Provides"... to recall that gracious life – out-of-death moment in their history. But no.... Rather, they chose to memorialize the failure of the people's faith by naming the place after their question: Massah means *proof* or *test*. Meribah means *contention* or *quarrel*. Why did you quarrel and put God to the test... The name memorializes the complaint, the doubt, and the question of the people, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

That odd place name is good news for us. It makes holy space for our deep and penetrating questions. You know, in the face of human suffering, the kindest thing you can do is stand in the company of another's hard questions. And often, the cruelest thing you can do is to offer some easy, unwarranted answer about the will of God. After the tsunami in Sri Lanka in 2004, one of the televised interviews showed a

large man of enormous physical strength who was unable to prevent four of his five children from perishing, and who – as he recited the names of his lost children to the reporter, in descending order of age, ending with the name of his four-year-old son – was utterly overwhelmed by his own weeping. Commenting on that interview, theologian David Bentley Hart said, “Only a moral cretin at that moment would have attempted to soothe his anguish by assuring him that his children had died as a result of God’s eternal, inscrutable, and righteous counsels, and that in fact their deaths had mysteriously served God’s purposes in history... Most of us would have had the good sense to be ashamed to speak such words.” (3)

And so we should. God did not will that tsunami to wash away those thousands of Japanese. Our Christian response to them is to stand with them in their grief, to give generously to the relief effort, to support them with our prayers, and to affirm their heartbreaking echo of the ancient question, “Is the Lord among us or not?” When we bring our big questions about what is going on in the world closer to home we know this to be true. Even Jesus hanging on the cross in unbearable suffering asked if he had been forsaken by God.

We are justified in having questions about the presence of God in our lives: when that rare form of cancer becomes our diagnosis or that of someone we love; when we sit next to the grave of someone we long for and wonder why we have outlived the other; when the job was lost for no explicable reason; when a tragedy strikes, or the crisis comes as if out of nowhere.... We are entitled to ask – “Is the Lord among us or not?” Our failure of faith, our honesty in asking, even our complaining have a special place in this holy script that records the drama of God’s involvement in human history.

We never stand alone amid our questions, especially our questions about human suffering. Neither do we stand forever without some assurance. That assurance may not come as the answer we long for, but the assurance will come nonetheless. God split that rock in the wilderness in two, and water flowed. So God will provide what we need – a holy presence and listening ear in the midst of our suffering; living water when we’re dying of thirst in this life; and the promise of new life – when we actually die. Is the Lord among us? Absolutely. The Lord draws so close to us in our seasons of need that we are invited to worship the Lord with our questions.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, Chapter XVI, p. 200.
- 2) From Lectures given by Tom Long at Austin Seminary, 2009, and used by Tom Are in “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands...until Lisbon.” 1/3/10, Village Presbyterian.
- 3) Tom Are, “Did God Survive Auschwitz?” 1/10/10.