

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – September 6, 2020
Something out of Nothing
Matthew 4:1-11 and Exodus 16:2-15

We have just heard a reading from Exodus, chapter 16. But if we move ahead just one chapter, we discover that the Hebrews current troubles were not completely satisfied by the manna that God had provided. In chapter 17, they are struggling with the jarring, threefold realities of “physical thirst, fear of death, and confusion regarding the future.”¹ And in their desperation, they present the most fundamental question of the people of God in every age. Namely, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Friends, have you ever asked that question? After participating in your twelfth, Zoom meeting of the week, having scarcely seen another person face-to-face. “Is the Lord among us or not?” Or standing in line at the grocery store separated from other customers by facemasks and distance, walled off from cashiers visible only through Plexiglas barriers, and bathed in the clinical aroma of hand sanitizer. “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Yes. Aware of the present clashes between protestors and counter-protestors, grieving the wounds of racial disparity, and longing for justice. “Is the Lord among

¹ Anatheia E. Portier –Young, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020),

us or not?” In a world in which so many are now mourning the loss of employment, the effects of widespread illness, and the degradation of the natural world. “Is the Lord among us or not?” And, then, to top it all off, we are now ensnared in an election year, with accusations flying amid ever-present skirmishes regarding the future of our nation. “Is the Lord among us or not?”

We know how easy it is to name our daily struggles. But it is so much harder to address those challenges directly. Yes. It is easy to feel disillusioned about the way that things are, and to fall into familiar patterns of grumbling mightily about the way that things should be. But it so much harder to be an agent of real change by engaging in powerful moments of healing between estranged neighbors, and by promoting lasting peace among warring people and nations, and by taking action to restore the wounds we have inflicted on our broken planet. Understandably, there are countless times when we would rather throw our hands in the air and say of this modern dystopia, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Friends, when we ask this existential question about the nature of God and of the reliability of God’s presence and engagement in our lives, we need not fear how the almighty will respond. For it is the very midst of this kind of wrestling that we actually grow closer to understanding the divine will, as is evidenced from reflecting

on our own, closest relationships. How many times, for example, have we asked, either directly or indirectly, if a loved one is on same page with us? If we were following the same script? If we were singing in harmony with one another?

It is commonplace for individuals to repeatedly survey the words and actions of others to discern if they are with us. To learn if they understand the point we are seeking to articulate. To determine if they agree with our position and with the possible resolutions. Each day, we turn to other people and ask if we can count on them, if we can rely upon them, if we can trust them, and if we can confide in them. For people of faith, this is akin to our relationship with God. And so we boldly ask, and we daily test, and we instinctively seek to discern, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

When the Hebrew people were in bondage in the pharaoh’s land, they wondered if freedom would ever become a real possibility. And then, when that longed-for freedom came to pass in miraculous fashion, their confidence quickly faded. In a matter of weeks, they began to wonder if God had brought them out of the land of their captors in order that they might die in the desert wilderness. And at every step along the way, they questioned God’s promise. For they were wandering in the desert with full knowledge of how deadly the desert could be.

Today, manuals are available for recreational hikers and members of the military who wish to know how much water is required for various levels of activity and temperature. One source estimates that each person requires six liters per day when crossing the Sinai.² But when rations are in short supply, the results can be disastrous. In June of 2017, migrants from Nigeria and Ghana were crossing the Sahara, trying to reach Europe for a better life, when their mode of transportation broke down. “Forty-four people died, including infants and children.”³

Hot, thirsty, famished, fleeing enslavement, and seeking a place to lay their heads, the ancient Hebrew people feared that they were facing a similar fate. Thus, as we enter into their narrative, by means of the Exodus accounts, we do so not with a mind toward condescending judgment, but with an ear of sympathy and a perennial desire for the preservation of human life. In their cry, we hear their desperation. Yes. But we also hear their hopeful conviction that God will redeem them once again.

And here we are reminded that no one, no matter how far he or she has strayed from God’s purposes, and that no situation, no matter how complicated, or disordered, or dysfunctional, is finally beyond the redemptive power of our triune

² Israel Eph’al, *The Ancient Arabs: Nomads on the Borders of the Fertile Crescent, 9th-5th Century B.C.* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 140.

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40118370>.

God. Yes. At many points along the way, we will taste the metaphorical manna that comes down from heaven just in time to quench the pains of our hunger. And we will drink the pure, living water that gushes forth as a gracious gift from God. And we will shelter in the cool breeze of a summer day, descending upon our lives to relieve our exhaustion and to remind us of the very breathe of God.

And in those moments, we will know that the Lord is among us. Creating life out of death, promising hope amid despair, and whispering into being something out of nothing. Until we come to ask not if the Lord is among us, but rather, what the Lord is doing in our midst.

Friends, may God be with you as you seek the divine form in every encounter, in every crisis, in every gift, and in every disappointment. May you sense God's blessings in abundance even now, and may God guide you in all goodness, now and forevermore. Amen.