

Barre Congregational Church

March 15, 2020: A Pastoral message: "Is the Lord among us?"

Scripture: Exodus 17 v 1-7

Greetings, dear Members and Friends of Barre Congregational Church!

I am writing to you, our beloved congregation, from my home. I miss seeing your faces and hearing you sing this morning. This, however, is a time when all of us are called to come together to do what is best to help prevent the current spread of the Coronavirus, which has now affected many countries around the world, as well as our country and our own State, Massachusetts. Many around the world have fallen ill, and many have lost their lives. It is a time to make the kind of decision that is good for everyone. That is why the deacons and I have called for worship services to be cancelled on this Sunday and next Sunday, March 22. We are also reminded that today is the third Sunday of Lent, a time when we as Christians remember the journey Christ had taken, preparing Himself for the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. I am asking that we take the time today and each day, to pray for ourselves, for one another and the world, and may this message from the Book of Exodus, Chapter 17 verse 1-7 give us hope for the days ahead...

Scripture Reading: Exodus 17:1-7

17:1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

17:2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"

17:3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

17:4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

17:5 The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

17:6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water

will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

17:7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "**Is the LORD among us or not?**"

The Exodus: A test of faith for the people of Israel

The wilderness experience described in the book of Exodus is a time when the faith of the Israelites is tested endlessly. We see them go on the most challenging and extraordinary journey through the desert of Sin. We see them suffering, we see them hungry and we hear their grumblings. We see God's intervention with manna and quails, and in this chapter, we see the escalation of their conflict with Moses and God, because they are not just hungry on their journey. They are thirsty! They need water! They are upset! The manna from heaven did not give them the long-lasting security and faith in God, who, unbeknownst to them, could hear their every plea and see their suffering. They are outraged at this horrible place, this desert with all its dangers! (Verse 3). Theirs is a strong outburst, which carried the legitimate feelings and reality of a people who have followed Moses through very dangerous territory. After all, they did not return to Egypt, even though they were longing for the pots of Egypt.

Moses' leadership is being tested as he is seeking God's help and guidance during this trying time. "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me!", he cried out to God. Up to this point we have seen the incredible leadership of Moses. He guided them, he encouraged them, and he helped strengthen their faith. But here in Chapter 17, we see an exhausted and frustrated Moses. Read verse 2, second part. Why... put the Lord to the test?

Is the Lord among us or not?

The wilderness is now the place of despair, where the people of Israel find it difficult to believe that the Lord is amongst them. Why must they suffer so much? In verse 7 it reads:

*And he (Moses) called the place, Massah and Meribah,
because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord,
saying, "**Is the Lord among us or not?**"*

But the wilderness is also becoming the place of hope and relief when God shows up again in a miraculous and ceremonial manner, providing them with the so much-needed water. God instructed Moses to walk ahead towards the rock at Horeb, and bring the elders with him, and God promised

to stand there, waiting. Moses were to take his staff and strike the rock. He did, and water came out of the rock. A rock that was solid, provided them their much-needed water. All of this did not happen on its own. No, God went ahead, and stood there, waiting, supporting, providing. The question **“Is the Lord among us or not?”** “received a miraculous answer!

What a promise! What a God we serve!

The story of the Exodus is a story of promise, a promise that God will liberate the people of Israel from their bondage under the Egyptians and give them a new land, which did happen. It is a story in which God wants to show them that they do have a living God. This story gives us hope when times are hard. It demonstrates the realities of our earthly struggles. It is the story of displacement, of the fight for survival, of hunger and thirst. It is a story of faith and lack of faith. It is a story of inspiring leadership and frustrated and exhausted leadership. It is a story of listening to God in very difficult circumstances, and it is a story of following God’s instructions.

Is this the same God, of today, you ask? We all sometimes face difficult times in our lives. We sometimes experience hopelessness and fear and despair as well. Do we wrestle with our faith in God, challenging God, “Are You here among us”? What is this illness and that suffering all about, Lord? And what is this Coronavirus all about? Where are you, Lord in all of this? From God’s point of view these are good and important questions to ask. God wants us to seek and trust God under all circumstances. We do not know all the whys and hows of our suffering sometimes, but God is consistent in God’s desire that we seek and trust God. The Lord goes ahead and stands there, waiting for us to listen, to believe, to hit the rock and see the promise of God unfold. It is through unwavering faith, even when we are concerned, tired, and grumbling and quarreling with one another, when God appears.

Let us all believe that God is with us. The Holy Spirit is our Guide. It is my prayer that we will bring all our worries to God, and that we will find God waiting and revealing God’s love and compassion in ways beyond our understanding. Amen

May God bless and protect us all!

Pastor Margaret Keyser