

Sermon for 27 September 2026

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Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

That’s the last line of today’s reading from Exodus, and worth a bit of consideration.

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

The Hebrew people, having been liberated from slavery in Egypt, are now wandering around the Desert of Sin. They seem to be lost—again. And they are whining and complaining—again. They are hot and tired and thirsty—and they don’t hesitate to let their leader, Moses, know about it. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

I remember these “wandering the desert” stories from my Sunday School days. We’d hear about the wonderful things God was doing for God’s chosen people—turning bitter water into sweet water, sending manna and quails from heaven, putting a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead them. And the response of the people was always to complain. Over and over and over again, complaint after complaint.

This version of the story can contribute to a very negative view of the Hebrew people—rather immature, somewhat self-centered, always complaining, impatient, ungrateful. While this is often the way these passages are taught, over the centuries, such depictions and interpretations have contributed to a lot of unconscious and even overt antisemitism. That’s not good, and certainly not in line with Jesus’ instruction to love our neighbors.

So, let’s take another look at this text. Dig a little deeper. And see if we can’t find something more meaningful, more relevant and less judgmental, something more in line with Jesus’ view of the world. Let’s, for a moment, put on our imaginary sandals and walk with those Hebrew people into that desert.

In her sermon posted to the “Working Preacher” website, Dr. Anatheia Portier-Young,¹ Associate Professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity School, provides some perspective on this passage. She points out that scientists such as Claude Piantadosi², author of the text “The Biology of Human Survival: Life and Death in Extreme Environments” estimate that the human body can survive about 100 hours without water, under “average” conditions. 100 hours. Just over four days.

¹ Portier-Young, Anatheia. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary>. March 12, 2023. “Commentary on Exodus 17:1-7.

² Piantadosi, Claude. “The Biology of Human Survival: Life and Death in Extreme Environments” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 52-53

However, the Hebrew people were not experiencing “average” conditions. Earlier parts of Exodus indicate that these events most likely took place during the months of May and June, when the average temperature in the Sinai is between 82 to 91 degrees Fahrenheit. And the average high temperature during those months is between 95 and 104 degrees Fahrenheit.³ Dr. Piantadosi estimates that, at 90 degrees, survival time can be decreased by a factor of two. So, that 100 hours is now 50 hours. Just over two days.

And that’s without doing anything. But the Hebrew people weren’t still. They were following the moving pillar of clouds, during the hot day, carrying everything they owned, all they needed to survive. Tents, cooking equipment, clothing. Lugging around babies and toddlers. Running after energetic children. Herding animals. Assisting elders.

Dr. Piantadosi puts it like this, “under extremely hot desert conditions...during forced marching...sustained high sweat rates can reduce estimated survival time without drinking water to as little as seven hours...” Seven hours. Less than half a day.

Let’s think about this passage again. The Hebrew people are out in the desert, unfamiliar territory to a group who, for nearly 400 years lived, had in the fertile Nile delta. They are not traveling on a highway or marked road, but following a pillar of clouds and fire. Without water. Feeling their skin dry up, their lips crack. Watching their children wilt under the heat. Listening to the weakening cries of their infants.

Is it any wonder that they were upset? That they complained? That they asked, “Is the Lord among us?” Frankly, I’m a little surprised the Hebrew people were complaining. Where did they find the energy?

This situation clearly threw Moses for a loop. As leader, he was the one to field all these complaints and, without a good answer, he feared for his life. So, finally, Moses did what he probably should have done in the first place—he talked to God.

And God answered, without hesitation, without recriminations. God didn’t scold the Hebrew people for their complaints. Nor did he rebuke Moses for not coming to God sooner.

Instead, God answered immediately and generously. “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. 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.”

Go, with the elders, with your community. Go, and God will be standing there in front of you. Go, strike the rock and water will come. Go, that the people may drink. Go.

In reflecting on this text, putting myself in the dusty sandals of the Hebrew people, imagining carrying those heavy loads and listening to the children’s cries, I found myself

³ http://www.holiday-weather.com/sinai_peninsula/averages/

very much in sympathy with their complaints. “Why am I here, God, and where are you?”

What lessons can we learn from these ancient stories? What can we draw from this wisdom and bring forward into our lives today?

This story is rich with lessons, about faith, about courage, about leadership and community, and so much more. I encourage you to think about it as you go out into the world after today’s service.

But before we conclude, there are three areas, three learnings, that stuck with me during my own reflections, three things I’d like to improve in my own life going forward, that I’d like to share with you.

First, tone down the judgment. It’s easy for me to stand here in this comfortable place, having had a cup or two of coffee, and look with judgement on all the whining and complaining. But when I think about going for days without water. Of hearing the cries of the children petering out as they grow weak. Of seeing the elders sinking down into the sandy path. Then, then, my perspective changes. And I realize I have no business judging them for their complaints.

My goal is to try to remember this when I am faced with complaints from people around me, with grumbling and whining. To remember that I am not walking in that other person’s shoes. I don’t have a full understanding of their suffering. And that, like God demonstrated, my response also should be immediate, generous and loving.

Second, when I am stuck, when I am angry or confused, when I am thirsty and hungry and tired, to remember to talk to God first—and not to worry about making it pretty. God understands even when we don’t pray with beautiful phrases and poetic language. While I value the beauty of the prayers in our prayerbook, I sometimes think we do ourselves a disservice by not including some prayers with stronger language.

Take a look at some of the Psalms⁴, 137 in particular. Remember Job’s cries of desperation, “What’s the point of life when it doesn’t make sense, when God blocks all the roads to meaning?”⁵ Recall Jesus’ own words on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”⁶

God can handle strong language. God can handle strong feelings—anger and grief and pain. God can handle wails and sobs and screams. With or without words.

My goal is to try to remember this in all moments, not just when I’m in church. Pray without ceasing.⁷ In every moment, in whatever words are available, even when words

⁴ Psalm 137

⁵ Job 3:23, also Job 7, Job 30 (The Message)

⁶ Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:17

are not available. Place my cares before God⁸, who is always there, waiting, generous and loving.

Finally, how do I respond to the question the Hebrew people asked, a question that is still being asked by many today, "Is the Lord among us or not?" We can certainly look to history, to the wonders the Hebrew people experienced throughout the desert wanderings, to the miracles Jesus performed during his life, to the testimonies of the saints. But how do we answer that question today. Is the Lord among us today, here, now?

What comes to mind are the words attributed to the saint and mystic Teresa of Avila, "Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which He looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which He walks to do good, yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world."⁹

Am I acting as the hands and feet and heart of God in the world today? When I see someone in need, whether or not they are complaining, is my response immediate, generous and loving? Am I taking action? Am I going, as God instructed Moses, and us, to do? Can I do more?

When I see someone who is thirsty, what am I doing to find water? And can I do more?

When I see someone who is hungry, what am I doing to share food? The little pantry out front is a start. Refuel is good. Can I do more?

When I see someone sleeping in their car, or on the sidewalk, or under a bridge, what am I doing to support the unhoused? Our safe stay program is great. Advocacy for the unhoused is important. Can I do more?

There are so many needs in the world. So many reasons to ask the question, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

I truly believe that the answer is yes, yes, a thousand times yes. Now, I need to go out into the world and live it. Will you join me?

Amen.

⁸ 1 Peter 5:7

⁹ <https://www.stmaryschoolswormvill.org>, St. Teresa of Avila Roman Catholic Church website.