



COVENANT WORD

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

EXODUS 17:1-7

*A message by Rev. Elizabeth Evans Hagan, Guest Preacher
Sunday, March 15, 2020*

Is God with us or not?

First of all, I can't believe I'm here. You're here. We're still breathing after the week we've had. Plans suspended of all kind. No more sports on TV. No more trips. No more fun it seems – at least the kind we expected to have.

Nothing about life moving forward in the weeks ahead that feels normal, that is normal. Concerns about our own health, the health of our children and loved ones, especially the older ones. Fears about our own boredom, paying the bills when we can't work, TV rotting the brains of our kids, and even deeper concerns for the most vulnerable among us: kids who don't eat unless they go to school, seniors who won't be able to leave their homes for weeks and be in need of medicine and care, those in isolation rooms in the hospitals and those who treat them and so on.

Is God with us or not?

Our faith tells us so,
He's got the whole world, in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands he's got the whole world in his hands.

But in our hearts, we're starting to wonder.

We don't understand why we have to walk through such trials. We don't understand why we must suffer. Why the most vulnerable must suffer? We don't understand why here, why now, why us in this 2020?

It's like we're in the wilderness or something.

And so, I can't think of a better scripture reading to sit with today than the one from the Hebrew scriptures in Exodus 17. For before us we find the story of a people who were trying to follow God, trying to do the right thing, trying to stay the course in unprecedented circumstances yet, still they were at a point in their

journey where they wondered.

Is God with us or not?

I don't know if you are like me but every time I read or hear sermons on passages of scripture taken from the wilderness journey of the Israelites – stories that clearly highlight their complaining, their disobedience and their questions for God – I easily find myself critical of them. For my first reaction to reading such descriptions as "the people quarreled with Moses" and "the people complained against Moses" is to judge. How ungrateful they were! How self-centered they were! How lost they were from their spiritual center! For if we followed the Exodus story, we know that chapter 17 is not the first time that such words have come to their lips. In fact, this is the 4th time, we read of them complaining to Moses and thus to God since leaving Egypt as freed slaves. So, can't they just get it together?

For in previous episodes, they've complained about protection from their former masters. They've complained about not having water and when they got it being too bitter to drink.

They've complained about having food.

Yet every time, even with the quarrels – needs have been met. They safely make it over the Red Seas. Moses helps the water taste sweet. And manna falls from the sky.

Yet, I don't want to judge them today because I want to point out about all of these complaints is that they were not for Christmas gifts they wanted and didn't get. They weren't for college funds for their children. They weren't complaining about having fancier clothes. They were complaining because their BASIC human needs for protection, for water, for food weren't being met.

And by time we get to chapter 17, it's happening all

over again. And this time it's water – not just bitter water but no water.

One hundred hours. This is the oft cited statistic of how long human can last without water. However, this does not account for the fact that they were in a desert, a literal desert where it was hot and dry and it the intense heat not only wilts the body but the spirit as well.

Was God with them or not?

The people cry out to Moses and say, "Give us water to drink!"

And in response to what Moses believed was a soon to be riot on his hands he approaches the Lord to ask for guidance.

The Lord asks for courage from Moses – for it would be no small thing for him to face the people who believed in their words, "Brought us out of Egypt to kills us and our children and livestock with thirst." – and walk in front of the people and do a very specific task. To take his staff, the same staff I might add that he used to lead the people across the Red Sea as it parted, and strike a rock where God said water would come from. Would it work?

Was God with them or not?

Moses did and the water came. The Israelites live to see another day as a need for physical well-being was met. Their thirst is quenched. Their lives are saved for another day at least.

Yet, hear this, they did not get to leave the wilderness.

Their need for water was met, yet, but the larger hardship surrounding their daily activities, their sense of security as a people and musings about the future (like how long would this last?) remains intact.

And I have to think for a moment to put myself in their shoes – what a great time this would have been for God to helicopter them out of there!

What a great time this would be for God to say hey guys, I'm sorry for all the trouble you've been going through – here's the secret door to speed on to the end, just walk right through it.

Just walk a little further on, 100 cubic to the left and

there you'll see and smell and taste the land flowing with milk and honey!

But God doesn't. They're still going to be hot. They're still going to be tired. They're still going to rely on manna falling from the sky. They're still going to be drink water that came from rocks which they can hope will be there tomorrow.

They're still going to be in the wilderness.

Was God with them or not?

I'm here my friends to tell you today that God was with them. And is God is with us; even if the unfamiliar or unfavorable or unwanted circumstances around our lives make us feel differently.

You may be sitting here today thinking that all the world has gone mad and they're no recovering from this chaos anytime soon.

You may be sitting here today with a heavy heart because of something deeply rattling going on in your own story.

You may be sitting here today with a cup that running over full of sorrows, carrying burdens for those you love who seem unwilling to fight for their own lives anymore.

We are a people who know the wilderness very well, not just because it's Lent Sunday #3 but because our world is broken and lost and polluted by what is not in the best interest of us all. Life can be and is right now so very hard.

When Valerie invited me to come be with BCOC today several months ago which now seems like a lifetime ago – she asked me to speak on this topic of wilderness and also, she encouraged me to share with you what some of my wilderness experiences in life has been.

And the more I thought about it, the more I chuckled to myself and a little and asked, "What hasn't been?"

From growing up in a home where I was deigned the gift of being myself and wallowed in years of loneliness and not being taught basic life skills,

To feeling a call to ministry in my 20s to become a pastor in a denomination where folks told me there's

no way, I'd find my own pulpit,

To being rejected by my own father when I told him I wanted to be ordained (he was on the TN Baptist committee against women in ministry at the time)

To struggling to have children for 8 years unsuccessfully enduring social isolation as I wondered what my family would become and if my desire to parent would ever be fulfilled

To following my husband's calling to a job in a part of the country where again I was told by denominational leaders that I would never work in that state and facing a smear campaign by the historically evangelical organization my husband worked for being told that I was not the kind of woman they wanted him to be married to . . .

And so on.

I don't think I'm being dramatic by saying that my life has more been about wilderness moments than the everything is awesome ones. And while yes, there have been provisions at every turn – people who saw me, loved me, gifts of connection and physical needs met in places where I felt nothing but hopeless – still there was the wilderness.

There have been plenty of days in my personal life as well as my work with churches where I've woken up in the morning and said to God, "Now why is THIS not over yet? I'm so tired of this!"

Wilderness, wilderness and more wilderness. . .

And let me testify today that my soul was all the better for walk through these great unknowns.

There's a myth I think that comes with the American dream – the myth that if we work hard, make good choices, are as smart as we can be – we'll have a good life, a life without too much trouble and the wilderness won't find us. Or maybe it will but it will be a one-time and then it's over.

But if this particular Lent is teaching us anything – the wilderness is for us all. And again, and again and again.

We can't go over it.

We can't go around it.

We must go through it. But as we do –

Is God with us or not?

Yes. God is with us. And though we don't know how long it will last. Though we don't know how much it will cost us. Though we don't know how much therapy we're all going to need when it's over. And though we may dislike the wilderness with all our being and want to drink or sleep or ignore our way through it, on we go.

We embrace the wilderness because it's part of our life of faith. We go on because we believe that it is good to ask for our needs and God will provide for them – even in the most surprising of ways.

We go on because God has given the Spirit to be among us and will not leave us, no matter way.

Amen.