

Is the Lord among us or not?

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Texts: Exodus 17:1-7

As I read our passage for this morning, I thought about how – perhaps the past 18 months has felt in some ways like an Exodus for us. We all moved out of public spaces as much as we could. Limited our in-person social lives. Moved into a virtual world. Into a Zoom world. Out of a necessity to protect ourselves and our communities, especially the most vulnerable.

Not all of us – that is for sure. As Sarah's beautiful blessing this morning reminds us. Healthcare workers, caretakers, grocery store workers, postal carriers, emergency services had to lean more into the unknown world where a spreading virus changed so much of our day-to-day lives.

Even now. As we open our doors and LEARN once again how to worship together -in this new hybrid world, we know in our hearts that the way we live, gather, be in community continues to transform and unfold, but we know that no matter the changes we make, our sanctuary here – reaching far across to our sanctuaries at home – we have one another, this community. What we are able to do now in comparison to last fall gives me a renewed sense of hope that new possibilities still lie ahead.

And no, maybe the Red Sea did not literally open up, to pave way for all of us to cross like it did for Moses and the Israelites as they escaped slavery and violence, as we stepped out of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd pandemic waves.

But when I received my vaccine last spring, it felt like the whole Pacific Ocean opened up. When I could squeeze each family member and friend in my arms for the first time in over a year. Sitting at a big picnic table, eating and sharing laughs. It was if I could see the Promise Land... almost touch it...

Then in the summery month of June, the delta variant knocked on our doors, and right around the time I finished my chaplaincy training in early August, I saw the covid cases begin to rise once again in the hospital. I remember forgetting to breathe when walking by an ICU room with a patient only twenty-three-year-old on a ventilator. Saying my farewells to nurses who I still hold in my prayers, who are utterly exhausted.

I turned to God and asked, where are you? I thought this was all over. I thirst for a land that rids all of us this disease, that brings us back to the way things were. I am sick and tired of worrying. I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.

And I know, believe me I know that if these past 18 months have taught me anything, it is to seize this day. This moment – that we have together – right now, in this sanctuary, right now with our church family joining us online. Right now, for the music, for the choir, for the river of life.

There are celebrations and joys – couples who have waited so long to get married are finally hosting their weddings. Families and friends are able to finally gather to hold memorial services for their precious loved ones. College campuses are alive again. All these things that I know I took advantage of. I mean never did I think I would sit in traffic and be happy with such normalcy.

The delta variant reminds me that like the Israelites, we are not quite yet at the promised land. But where we are now is still better than where we were. At least here in the New England area.

The Israelites just escaped enslavement and violence, and perhaps had hoped that it was all over, to then be faced with the reality that there is wilderness that lies around and before them. With feelings of uncertainty, fear, and yes, even hope as they cry out to Moses and ask him if the Lord is still among them.

Even with all these incredible blessings, even with the vaccines that has made new beginnings possible, after the crossing of the Red Sea, I find myself crying out: God, where are you? Are you still among us?

Reading Exodus has taught me something.

It is okay to ask the question – where is God? In fact -that is the very question that no matter where we are, what we are doing, no matter how good things are, we should ask.

If not for any other purpose but to remind us that God is present.

The Israelites teach us - Cry out. Show God your fears, your doubts, your tears, your exhaustion – for when we do, I believe we begin to make space in our hearts for God and for healing. It has been a hell of a journey these past 18 months.

As much as I know I want to package up what we have been through, store it away, tie a neat little bow on it....I know I can't.

Children remind me I can't. My six-year-old nephew asks for a new mask several times throughout the day, because he wants a fresh clean one to protect himself from covid. The same little one who believed a year ago that a vaccine would not only keep people safe but would bring back all those who died from covid.

I know friends who have shared that their children eat their lunches quickly at school, and sometimes don't finish it because they are afraid of keeping their mask off too long.

It is going to take time. Time before this fourth wave is behind us, before (if) there are future waves are behind us. And it is going to take time to heal.

More than ever do I think we need to cry out to God. To not try to hold it in, but to share our hearts with the divine who already knows what burdens us.

For when the Israelites cried out to Moses and asked, "if the Lord is among them or not?", God directed Moses to break a rock. And water poured out from that rock...

Okay, I have to be honest. When writing this sermon, I googled "is there water in rocks" to be utterly surprised by an NBC news article entitled: "Earth's rocks contain a hidden ocean's worth of water." According to the article, there are massive amounts of water deep beneath the planet's surface, locked inside the molecular structure of minerals in the mantle. But before you pick up your pickaxe, no this water is not liquid or even ice or vapor – it is much more compact or something.

Obviously, I am not a geologist....

Moses used his staff to break open a rock and water flowed from it...water the Israelites needed to survive their journey, water they needed to quench their innermost spiritual longings. The same water we talk about in this re-gathering season, to invite all who are thirsty for warmth and connection, kindness and courage.

The Israelites show us that it is okay to throw your hands up and say God, where are you? I need you.

I believe crying out gives us permission to just let our hearts be broken. To share those broken parts with God. To be vulnerable with God.

God can take it. Yes, the Creator of this world can take it. All of it – the anger, the frustration. Feelings are a good thing – they connect us to what makes us most human. They give God a chance to cry with us.

Dr. Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, who has led many talks, sharing her research on vulnerability, makes an incredible point from her research: “we cannot selectively numb emotions, when we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions.”

Vulnerability – what I see as stepping outside of our comfort... that hesitancy to share ourselves, our stories, with one another and even with God.

One evening, this past summer when I was working at Beverly Hospital as a chaplain, I was sitting in the nursing station, typing up some notes.; I overheard a conversation between a nurse and CA. Both expressed frustration with an encounter they had with one patient. Even through that frustration, I could tell they were concerned. The nurse asked me if spiritual care would mind visiting the patient.

Unsure of what I was getting myself into, I said – yes. I walked in to see the patient watching tv. I introduced myself, who I was and asked if it was an okay time to visit with him. He nodded and said, yes, pointed to a chair I could pull over and showed me that he was watching Yankees vs Red Sox game. As we watched the game, he told me about some of the Red Sox players and caught me up on the game.

Some silence passed. During a commercial, he looked down at his wedding ring and told me that he and his wife would go to these games a lot together. With tears streaming down his face, he told me his wife died three months ago. I remember feeling only humility, that he would share his grief with me, a stranger who he just met. I had the honor to learn about his wife and the forty-two years of marriage they shared. There were stories that made us laugh. And there were stories that brought tears to both our eyes.

Amidst the hospital noise, he bravely shared such joy and such pain. I think Brene Brown is right- I am not sure the joy they shared in their life together could be fully felt and shared without fully feeling the grief. Without crying out. He was not grumpy, having a bad night, I believe the nurse sensed that through his quarreling and that’s why she asked me to visit him.

I wonder if the Word that breaks open through rocks is reminding us that as we cry out to God, we will not only be able to speak our saddest sorrows, but we will be able to really experience the greatest joys.

The joys that bring each of our souls to life. The joys that begin to bring forth healing after all that we've been through.

In the coming weeks, year, as we journey this road together towards the promise land, we will get there, I know in my heart we will...

When it feels like everything is too much, I encourage you to cry out: "Where is God?" "Is the Lord among us or not"? Let your heart break open, finding hope and solace in God's presence who whispers in response: "Yes, I was and am and will always be right here." Amen.

