

# Is the Lord Among Us or Not? A Sermon on the Hiddenness of God



“Is the LORD among us or not?” That is the question that the people of Israel asked Moses, according to this morning’s Old Testament reading. The God of Moses had delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt; he had rescued them from the hotly pursuing armies of Pharaoh as they crossed the Red Sea; he then entered into a legal contract with them at Mount Sinai, a contract in which God promised the people that if they would keep his commandments, he would take care of them. That is the background to this morning’s reading from the Book of Exodus. But between the rescue at the Red Sea and the Sinai story are sandwiched a series of other stories that are almost comical if you read them one right after another, and this morning’s story is one of them. The first thing that happens is that the water tastes bad, so the people complain. Moses calls on God, and God fixes the water. Then there is nothing to eat. So the people complain again: “In Egypt, we were slaves, but at least we had three square meals a day.” So that night, a huge flock of quails arrive, and everyone has poultry for dinner. In the morning, God provides a special kind of bread, called manna, and he provides it every morning in the desert for the next forty years. So the people never go hungry again.

Then comes this morning’s story, and we know what is going to

happen. The Israelites move to a new camp, there is no water, and the people complain: "Did you bring us here so that we and our children and our cattle could die of thirst?" Moses prays to the LORD, Moses strikes a rock with his rod, and God gives the people water. It is not too difficult too appreciate the perspective that the Psalmist provides in those last few verses from the *Venite* that we do not usually read: "Harden not your hearts, as your ancestors did in the wilderness. . . forty years long I detested that generation . . ." I do not have God's patience, but before I came to teach at Trinity, one of the many jobs I worked at was IT support. The first question I always asked was "Did you check to make sure it's plugged in?" We had a special term for a certain kind of problem – a PEBKAC. PEBKAC stood for: Problem Exists Between Keyboard and Chair. I can appreciate a perspective that asks: "When will these people ever learn?"

On the other hand, the concerns of the people of Israel are not unlike our own, and one can appreciate their dilemma. After all, if a God can not at least provide the basic necessities of life for one's children and one's cattle, then what good is he? Where is he?

The question of God's presence is an ongoing one because God remains ever hidden. Although God gave his law to the Israelites, and eventually provided them with food and water in the desert, he still remained hidden. One must remember how stark was this new way of worshiping the divine that the God of Moses proposed to the people of Israel. The second commandment of the ten given at Sinai forbade the making of carved images to represent God. Other nations had gods they could see and touch, but Israel had only a law, and, first a tent, and, later a temple, in which there was no image of their God. God may be God, but the desert is still the desert. The God of Israel remained hidden for forty years in the desert, and the desert is lonely; it is frightening; it is uncertain; the overwhelming realities of life are only too

real in the desert. As for God, in the desert, God is the unknown, the God who remains hidden. "Is the LORD among us or not?" is a question that one might still ask, even today, even as we face our own deserts.

As Christians we may be tempted to propose a solution that too easily answers this question: Is God among us or not? Where is God? The New Testament answer to our question seems simple enough: Where is God? God is right here. Jesus is God, right here, for us. The conclusion of the christological hymn in Paul's Letter to the Philippians says it well: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Philip. 2:9-11 (ESV)

A simplistic reading of the New Testament would end right there, but it would be a misreading. It is true that, according to the New Testament, God has come among us in Jesus. But God does not come in a way that we might expect. We see that in this morning's gospel reading. By asking Jesus about the source of his authority, the chief priests and scribes were, in essence, asking him a variation on the question, "Is God among us or not?" Everything in Matthew's gospel that leads up to this question makes clear the source of Jesus' authority. Jesus had come proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven, had cast out demons, and healed the sick. In the Sermon on the Mount, he had re-interpreted the Mosaic law by contrasting what his hearers had "heard from of old" with his own "But I say to you." By asking the question the way they did, Jesus' adversaries made it clear that, in their eyes, they did not see that God had come among them in Jesus. To put it bluntly, they were asking Jesus, "Just who do you think you are?!"

One can imagine how a Hollywood hero would respond to such a blatant challenge: "Do ya feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?" But

the Jesus in Matthew's gospel is not like Hollywood, and he was not like the pagan deities who came to earth in Greek or Norse mythology. He is not a Zeus or a Hercules or a Thor or a Dirty Harry who announces his deity by his sheer power. When Jesus' opponents ask him the source of his authority, he does not respond by striking his enemies dead with bolts of lightning. Jesus does not walk around saying, "I'm God, so watch out!" Jesus instead answers the question by not answering it. He asks his opponents for the source of John the Baptist's authority, the prophet who had ended his ministry by being beheaded, the prophet whose mission ended in death. When they respond that they do not know whether John's authority came from heaven or from earth, Jesus responds "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." And, of course, Jesus' mission also ends in death.

One of the ancient writings of the church, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, written probably in the second or early third century, summarizes well the way in which God's Son has come among us as one of ourselves, in gentleness and humility:

*Now, did [God] send him, as a human mind might assume, to rule by tyranny, fear, and terror? Far from it! He sent him out of kindness and gentleness, like a king sending his son who is himself a king. He sent him as God; he sent him as a human being to humans. He willed to save humanity by persuasion, not by compulsion, for compulsion is not God's way of working. In sending him, God called humans, but did not pursue them; he sent him in love, not in judgment.*

Now if God comes to us as a human being, he does not come to us as a stranger, but as one like ourselves, as one we can know. He has given us knowledge of the hidden and unknowable God in a way we can finally grasp. God is no longer the hidden or the unknown. The passage from Philippians makes clear what that means: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did

not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Philip. 2:5-8 (ESV)

Yes, but . . . if God comes to us in human form, he also comes to us as one who is still hidden – hidden behind the flesh of an ordinary human being. And, again, the passage in Philippians makes this clear. Although the form in which the pre-incarnate Son existed was the "form of God" – and scholars have struggled to interpret the meaning of the phrase that "he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped" – the form that he took was the "form of a servant." The Greek here is *doulos*, not a servant like Jeeves the polite English butler, but a slave. It is because the incarnate God took this form of an ordinary human being, like a slave, that the religious experts of his time could so completely miss God's hidden presence in this Galilean Jewish man and ask: "By what authority do you do these things?"

But even more, the passage makes clear that incarnation means the humility of "obedience unto death," specifically, "death on a cross." Philippians makes clear that, from the beginning, the point of the incarnation was the crucifixion. For Paul, there is no abstract separation of a some general principle of "incarnationalism" from a gospel of atonement. God becomes human in order to die. From the standpoint of the crucifixion, a death by Roman torture, one might well ask the question: Is God among us or not? I cannot help but be reminded of Jesus' words as he neared his last moments: "I thirst." But unlike God's response to the Israelites in the desert, Jesus' Father did not answer his thirst with water from a rock. Instead, Jesus' enemies gave him sour vinegar to drink, and Jesus died asking "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When we look at the cross, we might well ask, "Is God among us or not?" Yet we know that the orthodox answer to that question

is that it is indeed on the cross that God is among us, for the one hanging on the cross, was the Son, who existed in the "form of God," the one whom his Father exalted three days later, and before whom someday every knee will bow, and every tongue confess.

How then can we answer for ourselves the question that the people of Israel asked in the desert: "Is the LORD among us or not?" It seems to me that if we are to answer this question as the gospel answers it, that we must answer it in two ways. On the one hand, yes, God is among us because God has taken on our humanity in Jesus Christ. He has come among us as an ordinary human being, just like ourselves. As faculty and students in an Anglican seminary, we can point to the many rich symbols that indicate God's special presence in this, our own rather modest tabernacle in the desert. There is the gospel book that contains the words of Jesus, in whom we believe that God has become incarnate. There is the cross we carry in procession, pointing to the sacrifice of Jesus' own flesh for us. There are the elements of bread and wine, in which we believe that we share in the risen Christ's body and blood.

But, on the other hand, we must also never forget that God's presence is always a hidden presence. Because God comes to us in the veil of the flesh of the one who took on the form of a servant, he indeed remains veiled. He comes among us hidden in the flesh of the crucified One. The incarnation both gives access to God and hides God. Even in the incarnation, God keeps his distance.

This means that there are at least three dangers to avoid. First, it is always possible to lose the distance of the sacred in the familiarity of the trappings. We study and pray together week after week. We hear the readings, we go through the motions. We see the same faces day after day, week after week. And somehow we forget that God's presence among us is a hidden presence. We lose the mystery of divine distance in the

ordinary everydayness. We forget that it is God who has given himself to us in Christ's humanity, not we who make God happen when we come to this place. Because God is supposed to be here, we think that God's presence can be controlled. Because that presence is hidden, we think that it can be safely ignored. We miss the presence of Christ in the humdrum predictability of one another and of ourselves. We forget that each one of us is sacred because we are created in God's image and we bear the image that the human Christ himself bears.

Second, there is also the danger of fleeing the divine presence lest it become too close. God's presence among us can make us aware of our own frailty, our own weaknesses, our own sinfulness, our own trespasses against God and against one another. We would rather that God kept his distance because a divine judge who is a stranger is at least more tolerable than a divine judge who is a threat. At times like these, we need to be reminded that God's presence is a veiled presence, a mediated presence, a presence in which we experience divine judgment only in the gentleness that is the nearness of the Christ who has come among us as a servant, as one who came to die for us.

Third, somehow, we know not how, we may lose the divine presence completely. Like the children of Israel, we may suddenly find ourselves in a desert we did not ask for, and from which we can find no escape. At such moments, we indeed may be tempted to cry, "Is the LORD among us or not?" At such times, we are reminded that God's presence is hidden for us in one who has been crucified, that God's glory is hidden in the suffering of the cross.

But whether we approach God through the veiledness of the crucified humanity of Christ, or avoid God as the threatening judge, or simply ignore God because we have become too familiar with him, in this life, God will always remain hidden. We can expect no more than glimpses of his presence. Perhaps that presence will become evident to us in the words

of Scripture, in the Bread of Life of the eucharist, in the living water with which a child is baptized, in the stranger who meets us and asks us for a cup of water, in the quietness of meditation or even in the desperation of a prayer of loneliness. But even in that presence, God will always remain hidden. We need the reminder that we must come to know God in the desert, through his absence as much as his presence. Even when God comes among us, he comes as the hidden One.