

The Humility of Divine Presence: A Sermon

Exodus 17: 1-7

Psalm 78

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32



Among other things, the Bible is a book of questions. The very first question in the Bible is the question the serpent asks of Eve, “Did God actually say, You shall not eat of any fruit of the garden?” (Gen. 3:1) And the first question God asks in the Bible is “Where are you?” followed by the questions “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Gen. 3:9, 11) More questions: “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49) “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34) “Simon, son of John, Do you love me?” (John 21:15) What these questions all have in common is that they are not attempts to find out information, but are rhetorical. They are questions that aim for a response from the hearers.

In both the Old Testament and the gospel readings this morning we find accounts of an exchange of questions between two groups of people, and like the other questions I mentioned, these are rhetorical questions. They are not aimed at getting information, but in provoking a response from those being questioned. In the Exodus reading, Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt, and they find themselves in the desert without water. In response, they ask Moses: “Why did

you bring us up out of Egypt, to kills us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" At the end of the reading, the text states: "They tested the Lord by saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?" Moses responds to the situation with his own set of questions: He asks the people, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" " He then asks God, "What shall I do with this people?" (Exodus 17:2-4)

The gospel reading takes place at the end of Jesus' ministry, immediately following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by his driving the money changers out of the temple. The chief priests and the elders then ask Jesus a question, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Matt. 21:23) Presumably these leaders are asking by what authority he cleared out the temple, but the text also mentions that Jesus had healed many blind and lame people who had come to him in the temple (v. 14). And, of course, Jesus' entire ministry had included healings, exorcisms, and miracles, so "these things" likely refers not only to Jesus' actions in the temple, but to all the signs that accompanied his ministry, as well as to his preaching and teaching. As did Moses, Jesus responds to the question with his own question, "The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?"(v. 25)

As readers of the Bible, we have a certain advantage to those who originally asked the questions of Moses and Jesus. Because we have the entire book of Exodus and the entire book of Matthew, we know the answer to the questions. At the beginning of Exodus, God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush and said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry . . . and I have come to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . ." (Exodus 3:7-8) At the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, toward the beginning of Matthew's gospel, a voice from heaven proclaims, "This is my

beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt. 3:17) So God did not lead the people of Israel into the desert so that they would die of thirst. The authority with which Jesus did the things he did is the authority of the voice that named him as the Father’s “beloved Son.”

As I mentioned above, these are rhetorical questions. None of them are about getting information. Both sets of questions—the question the Israelites asked Moses, and the question that the chief priests and the elders asked Jesus—are variations on the same question: “Is the Lord present among us or not?” Rhetorically, they are demands that, if God is with Moses, if God is with Jesus, then this presence needs to be made evident in a clear and unambiguous way.

In both cases, at least from the perspective of the questioners, the questions were justified. Moses had led the Israelites into the desert, and they were now without water. Being without water in a desert means thirst, and, within a few days, death. As leaders of the Jewish people, the scribes and pharisees had an obligation to test the genuineness of Jesus’ ministry. They were familiar with the passage in Deuteronomy 18:19 that reads, “But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.” At least one possible reading of the crucifixion of Jesus was that he died the death of a false prophet.

However, in spite of the apparent reasonableness of the questions, in both cases, there was sufficient evidence to have forestalled the question: In the previous chapters in Exodus, God had already brought the people out of Egypt; God had delivered them from the pursuing Egyptians at the Red Sea, in a similar story about lack of water, God had made bad water drinkable, and, finally, when there had been no food, God had provided a kind of bread called manna for the people to eat in the wilderness (Exodus 12-16). Had the God who had taken care

of the people so far suddenly deserted them? The Israelites who were worried about lack of water seemed to be suffering from a remarkably short memory.

Similarly, in the gospel story, some clue to the divine source of Jesus' authority to clear the temple should have been evident in his healings, his exorcisms, his bringing sight to the blind, and making the deaf to speak. How did Jesus respond to John the Baptist's own question, "Are you the one to come or shall we look for another?" "Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." (Matt. 11:3-6)

In both cases, the clues were certainly there. Why then the failure to recognize what should have been obvious? Certainly, we could argue that the problem is one of forgetfulness, and ungratefulness, but the problem is also one of ambiguity. In both the Exodus reading, and the gospel, God is present, but God is present in a way that is not unambiguously self-evident. Through Moses, God did lead Israel out of Egypt, but the lack of water in the desert could be interpreted to mean that they had been led into the desert to die of thirst. The ancient world was familiar with stories of fickle gods who were generous one moment and struck you dead the next. Jesus had done miraculous signs, but those signs could have been the signs of a false prophet.

Why is it so easy to miss God's presence in the ambiguity of our lives? How is it that we can have those times in our life when we experience God's closeness, or God's deliverance, or answers to prayer, only to find ourselves asking just a little bit later, "Is the Lord among us or not?" People respond to ambiguity with fear. I suspect that often we do not have trouble believing in God so much as we fear that God cannot be trusted. We find it easier to believe that God is to be feared than that God is to be loved. The Israelites had plenty of

reasons to believe in the God who had led them out of Egypt, but when they found themselves without water in the desert, their fear of dying of thirst led them to question: "Is the Lord among us or not?" The religious leaders of Jesus' day had seen the kinds of works that Jesus did, and should have been able to connect the dots. The question they asked, "By what authority do you do these things?" points to a kind of insecurity. John's gospel tells us they feared that the Romans would "take away both our place and our nation." (John 11:49) They were not so much concerned about Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God as the possibility that another king, a Roman emperor, might take away everything they had. Jesus goes on to say in Matthew's gospel that the tax collectors and prostitutes believed John the Baptist when the religious leaders did not (Matt. 21:31-32) . Who had the most to lose if John the Baptist was a prophet? And who had nothing to lose?

But if ambiguity leads to fear, why is God not more clear if he wants to make himself known? We can find a clue in this morning's reading from Philippians: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is 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." (Phil. 2:5-7) Several times in this passage, Paul uses some variation of the word "humility," and, paradoxically, he applies the words "humility" and "humble" to the God who has become human in Christ. Paul says that we should pattern our own actions on those of Christ, ". . . in humility count[ing] others more significant than ourselves." Paul says that although Christ was "in the form of God," he took on the form of a servant." Christ "humbled himself, . . . making himself nothing." (v. 3, 6)

When we think of the attributes of God, we think of all the "omnis": words like "omnipotence," "omniscience," "omnipresence." When we think of God, we think of someone who

can do absolutely anything. We do not automatically think of humility when we think about God, but, there it is. If we take the incarnation of God in Christ seriously, then we have to take seriously that God is humble, that in becoming a human being, the Creator of the universe became a servant, and allowed himself to be crucified by his own creatures. As Paul says, Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, "even death on a cross" (v. 8). And it is in this humility that God's unlimited power is most truly expressed. This morning's collect has it right: "O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen." The answer to the fear of divine absence is the humility of divine presence in the cross.

This divine humility means that when God comes to us, he does not force his reality on us, and he comes to us in a way that can be missed. When God delivered Israel from Egypt, he brought them into a desert that was a real desert, and deserts do not have a lot of water. For the Israelites in the desert, the desert was not obviously a place where God was. It was a threatening place. When God took on the form of a human being, he became a first century Galilean peasant who said of himself, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matt. 8:20) For the Jewish leaders, an upstart from a backwater like Galilee was an unlikely claimant to divine authority, and his supposed authority was a cause of fear, a threat to their security and the security of their nation. It is always possible to interpret the divine presence as divine absence.

It seems then that the ambiguity of the divine presence demands a response from us. When God's people interpret God's presence as absence to ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?," it is a question that rebounds on the questioner. So Moses

responds to the Israelites with his own question: "Why do you test the Lord?" (Exodus 17:2) Jesus turns the question on the religious leaders of his people: "Was John's baptism from heaven or from man?" (Matthew 12:24) The rebound question turns the question from a question about God's presence to a question about the questioner. As God asked Adam, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9) As Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15)

But the humility of the divine presence also means that the divine answer that responds to the question by challenging the questioner is not the last word. When God questions us, it is not a Zen koan like "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" that has no answer. God does provide a definitive answer to our question, "Is the Lord among us or not?". In the Old Testament, God answered his people by bringing water out of the rock, even though they doubted, and eventually he brought Israel into the land he had promised to Moses when he appeared in the burning bush. Some, however, ended up staying in the desert. Matthew tells us the final answer to the fear that lay behind the question of the scribes and priests about Jesus' authority. When the women who were Jesus' followers came to his empty tomb looking for the body of the crucified Jesus, they were met by angels who told them: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen." (Matt. 28:5) "Do not be afraid!" Why? Because "not here" does not mean "absent," or "missing," but "alive," not "dead." "Is the Lord among us or not?" Matthew's gospel provides us with the definitive answer to this question in the last verse of his gospel, when the risen Jesus tells his followers: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20)

Like the ancient Israelites, we may find ourselves in a desert, and may find ourselves asking the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" We can ask that question as did the Israelites in the desert who questioned Moses, or as the

religious leaders who demanded of Jesus that he provide his credentials. But we can also ask the question like the prostitutes and tax collectors who believed John, or like the women followers of Jesus who came to the empty tomb. How we ask that question will suggest the question that may be asked of us in return.

The answer to the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" is that the ambiguity of God's presence does not mean that God is absent. It does mean that God is humble. God comes to us in the form of a crucified and risen Savior and his word to us is "Do not be afraid." (Matt. 28:10)