

“Is the Lord Among Us or Not?”
Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 21:23-32

Matthew 21:23-32

²³When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

²⁴Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

²⁵“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

Exodus 17:1-7

¹From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” ³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵The LORD said to Moses, “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. ⁶I 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.”

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

The Sermon

Is the Lord among us, or not?

Several days ago I was pointed in the direction of the autobiography of Howard Thurman, the American Christian theologian often called a “mystic” of the 20th century.

In his 80th year, Thurman published his autobiography, in the back pages of which he looks back and holds his life—and the nature of life—up to the light. He is summarizing something essential that he has learned, while at the same time recognizing the limitations of his or anyone’s ability to articulate it.

It reminds me of Karl Barth having talked about the inability of mere mortals to say anything about the Almighty God, coexisting with the absolute mandate that we spend our lives doing it anyway.

Howard Thurman wrote at the end of his autobiography: “All life, indeed all experience, is heavy with meaning, with particular significance. As was said of Tycho Brahe, the Danish astronomer [in the 1600s]: ‘They thought him a magician, Tycho Brahe—He was a magician—There is magic all around us—in the rocks, the trees and the [human mind]...and [those who strike] the rock aright may find [the magic] where [they] will.’

“At long last it is clear to me that...there can be no thing that does not have within it the signature of God, the Creator of life, the living substance out of which all particular manifestations of life arise; there is no tiling that does not have within it as part of its essence, the imprimatur of God, the Creator of all, the Bottomer of existence...

“Always, against all that fragments and shatters and against all things that separate and divide within and without, life labors to meld together into a single harmony.

“Therefore, failure may remain failure in the context of all our strivings, hatred may continue to be hatred in the social and political arena of the common life, tragedy may continue to yield its anguish and its pain, spreading havoc in the tight circle of our private lives, the dead weight of guilt may not shift its position to make life even for a brief moment more comfortable and endurable, for any of us—all this may be true.

“Nevertheless, in all these things there is a secret door which leads into the central place, where the Creator of life and the God of the human heart are one and the same...

“The years, the months, the days, and the hours have flown by my open window. Here and there an incident, a towering moment, a naked memory, an etched countenance, a whisper in the dark, a golden glow—these and much, much more are the woven fabric of the time I have lived...

“And this is the strangest of all the paradoxes of the human adventure: we live inside all experience, but we are permitted to bear witness only to the outside. Such is the riddle of life and the story of the passing of our days.”ⁱ

What do you think would be your testimony about life in the closing pages of your autobiography?

What might you and I be learning right now that would cross our minds as we sat down to write it?

I read the newspapers. I see the news. I stare at social media pages, seared by flame-throwing and fear-mongering and baiting and trolling—all of which are woven in among pictures of weddings and new babies and anniversaries and birthdays and retirements and walks in the woods and food that makes you want to eat your laptop screen.

I hear the thoughtful, respectful discourse, and I hear the shameless lying, and roll my eyes as it seems like anything that happens has to get spun, for political purposes, with toxic rhetoric—it’s not even sophisticated enough to call it “rhetoric” anymore; it’s just blatant hypocrisy and/or a decision to pretend that no one could possibly have a different perspective that’s humane, and makes sense, and is not built on lies or based entirely in fear.

And I think we can be forgiven for occasionally asking, whether literally or rhetorically: Is the Lord among us, or not?

When the Covenant People asked Moses if he had brought them out of bondage in Egypt to die of hunger in the wilderness, that was a rhetorical question.

When they asked if Moses had brought them out to kill their kids and their cattle with thirst, that was a rhetorical question.

But when they asked, “Is the Lord among us, or not?” that was more than rhetorical. To that question, they needed an answer. Because sometimes it’s a nice theological philosophy; but sometimes, our life depends on the answer. Because, as I heard Barbara Brown Taylor say at the beginning of a sermon one time, “If the Spirit is with us, then nothing else matters. And if the Spirit is not with us, then nothing else matters.”

We need to know, because for all the great things that humankind and the individual human being can achieve,

We are not saved by our excellent decision making; nor by our uncompromising superiority; nor by our correct beliefs and opinions; nor by the levers of power that we cling to with white knuckles and defend with fangs and water hoses and legal machinations and manipulations. We are not saved by our philosophy, or our theology.

Only God gives meaning to this life or any life, because God is the meaning of all life. Only God can redeem. Only God saves.

The good news is that when your own abilities fail you—your wisdom, your knowledge, your decision making, your steel trap mind, your patience, your health, your sanity—there is always a source of water in the dry and parched land, as you journey by stages.

Not too long ago our friend, the outstanding local spiritual director Jeannie DuBose, posed the question: what is the oasis, the pool, where you go to be refreshed? Where do you find the water that keeps you sustained in the wilderness?

Moses turned to God and said, these people are thirsty and angry—not to mention scared, and baffled, and profoundly uncomfortable, and filled with self-doubt, and worried for their parents, their children, their neighbors and friends, and their parched animals, the only security they

had to cling to. He said, these people are so restless and unhappy, they're just about ready to start throwing rocks at me. To stone me. To break me open.

And God said: When you get to the rock at Horeb, I'll be standing on it in front of you. Strike that rock, and water will come out of it, and the people can drink.

Where do you find your water? Where is the pool that sustains you?

I find myself going back to the place inside that says on my behalf,
 "I lift up my eyes to the hills;
 from where will my help come?
 My help come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."ⁱⁱ

I go to the place where I can say with all my ancestors,
 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
 he restores my soul.ⁱⁱⁱ

I go back to the part inside me that says,
 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear,
 though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
 though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult.^{iv}

I go to the God who says,
 There is a time for everything:
 a time to throw away stones,
 and a time to gather stones together;^v

who says: I will be calm, and will be angry no longer,^{vi}

to the God who sees the men about to stone a woman and says, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” and watched them turn away—sinners who were faced with a moment when nobody else had to tell them what their sins were, because they already knew for themselves, and in that moment of private, internal reckoning, before taking out their misdirected rage and frustration, they recognized their own sinfulness; acknowledged it, if only implicitly; stopped their ludicrous, destructive, abusive behavior; and abandoned the atrocity they were in the midst of committing.^{vii}

I go to the God who says,
 Love your enemies,^{viii}
 do good to those who hate you,^{ix}
 pray for those who persecute you.^x

I go to the Savior who said, if the way of this race of human beings is to break things, break me;^{xi}

who said,
 “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
 so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life;”^{xii}

who set his face to go to Jerusalem,^{xiii}
 deliberately and purposefully delivering himself to the cross;

who says, “Love one another, just as I have loved you.”^{xiv}

The world invites everyone to throw rocks at each other trying to cause injury and make themselves feel better (which, by the way, does not work. There is no such thing as an effective scapegoat. There is only a cross).

Or we can strike the rock itself, and find a fountain of living water.^{xv}

The world encourages people to go and try to break each other.

But our message is: we can gather and break bread instead, and find that God has been in our midst the whole time.^{xvi}

After the crucifixion of Jesus and the others around him, centurions were sent to complete the work of the state and make sure that all who were crucified had died. When they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.^{xvii}

There is a nourishing, nurturing holy mystery all around us—in the rocks, in the trees and in each human mind. And those who strike the rock aright may find it where they will.

Strike the rock, God said to Moses, and water will come out of it, and the people may drink, even and especially when they find themselves asking: Is the LORD among us, or not?

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ⁱ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1979), 268-270

ⁱⁱ Psalm 121:1-2

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 23:1-3

^{iv} Psalm 46:1-3

^v Ecclesiastes 3:1, 5

^{vi} Ezekiel 16.42

^{vii} John 8:2-11

^{viii} Luke 6:27 and 6:35 and Matthew 5:44

^{ix} Luke 6.27

^x Matthew 5.44

^{xi} Mark 14:22 etc.

^{xii} John 3:14-15

^{xiii} Luke 9:51

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- xiv John 13:34
xv John 4
xvi Luke 24:30-31
xvii John 19:33-34