

Is God Among Us Or Not?
Mark G. Toulouse

Exodus 17:1-7
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

Is God among us or not? That question, on the one hand, seems appropriate for theological education. In the last issue of the *Christian Century*, Tom Long, the homiletics professor at Candler, reminds us that Karl Barth “once described preaching as happening in the context of one urgent question hanging in the air: ‘Is it true - Is God present?’” Long, who by the way will be here as our Alumni/ae Days speaker in May this year, says that this question endures because a “deep hunger persists” among Christians “for a word from beyond us, a word from [God].”¹ This kind of hunger is certainly appropriate for theological education.

On the other hand, my experience with the question is somewhat different than Barth’s or Long’s description. I don’t know if my experience reflects yours or not. Most of the time when I hear the question, rather than seeking a transcendent word from God, it means somebody is less than satisfied with the way things are going. For example, in Texas, the NFL Dallas Cowboys are popularly known as God’s team. The old Texas stadium had a hole in the roof and the new stadium has a retractable roof, the local lore proclaims, so that God can more conveniently watch the team play. But until last year, there had been 13 straight years without a

¹ Thomas G. Long, “Why Sermons Bore Us,” *The Christian Century* (06 September 2011): 31.

playoff victory in Dallas. Every year around playoff time one would hear somebody ask, “Is God among us or not?” To be honest, there have been occasions in Canada when I was tempted to ask the question myself, most recently I suppose, when Rob Ford won Toronto’s mayoral election. Come on - Is God among us or not?

Our text from Exodus also asks this question. The text tells a familiar story. The Israelites are filing a complaint against both Moses and God because they are thirsty. And Moses says, “Why do you quarrel with me?” One almost expects the next sentence to be, “Take it up with God, not with me.” But instead he says “Why do you test the Lord?” None of them much like his response to their concerns. So they begin to threaten him personally. “They are almost ready to stone me,” he tells God. The passage emphasizes that Israel is having a tough time in the wilderness. The Exodus is not an easy trek, some cross-country walk where all enjoy the fields and the wildlife. No, the journey is hard. The people get hot, tired, and hungry. Now the text says they are severely dehydrated; their very life is threatened when they can’t find any water. Actually, it seems fairly reasonable to complain: “. . . did you bring us out of Egypt” just “to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” God responds by standing in front of Moses as he strikes the rock at Horeb, delivering life-giving water.

But at the end of the story, the narrative takes an interesting turn. Walter Brueggemann points out that the narrator focuses on two verbs to describe the people: their tendencies to “test” (Massah) and to “quarrel” (Meribah). The end of the story could have celebrated God’s life-giving gift, a natural ending to the story. Praise God for providing in this miraculous way. Instead, the one telling the story emphasizes, as Brueggemann puts it, “Israel’s inappropriate and remarkable lack of faith in the presence of God.” Israel, the storyteller seems to say, defines the reality of God’s presence by whether things are going right or not. In fact, since God delivered water when the Israelites complained, the action of God, if left uninterpreted by the narrator, might have actually confirmed what the majority of these Israelites already believed. God exists to take care of our needs, to meet our demands. If our needs and demands are not met, then we are right to complain about whether God is actually present among us or not. The one telling the story feels differently.²

The interpretation given here is that the reality of God transcends Israel’s demands. The value of God’s presence cannot be determined by whether a particular human community feels its needs are met adequately or not. We are too often guilty, like Israel in this instance, of collapsing the activities of God into concerns for our own happiness, health, comfort, security, and even, sometimes at

² See Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” in *General and Old Testament Articles, Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus*, Vol. 1 of *New Interpreter’s Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, see 817-819.

our worst, wealth. Canadians rightly complain about the tendency of American political culture to equate God with the welfare or security of the American nation. Our understanding of God is terribly perverted and twisted when we equate the presence of God with a victory in Iraq or Afghanistan. The Bible often reminds us that divine presence must not be seen as synonymous with our peculiar definitions of human prosperity, especially since we are the ones who screw up the possibility of human flourishing. No matter what the insurance companies might say, the “acts of God” are not to blame for this year’s drought in Texas or the devastating famine in Somalia.

Breuggemann compares Israel’s approach to God in this passage with modern day commercials. First, there is a terrible problem, then there is a need that finds expression, and then there is the introduction of a product that meets the need and solves the problem. In this text, God is understood as the “product” that should solve the problem. This is the kind of faith Israel is expressing here. It is a faith that uses God to meet our needs, and when God does not meet our needs, we question whether the product is working as it should.³ Is God among us or not?

Americans are not the only ones guilty of this perverted understanding of God. Human beings often define God by our self-interests. We understand God to be white, or male, or North American, or, most certainly, Christian. Is God really a

³ See Breuggemann, *NIB*, 1:818-819.

Christian? We prefer to make God in our image, the image of our self-interests, rather than to understand the radical meaning of the biblical claim that all human beings are made in the image of God.

We approach God and Christianity like we approach consumer products. How do they meet our needs? How do they help us flourish? And what is our definition of human flourishing? Is it success, wealth, comfort, security in the face of terrorism? How do we define a successful church? Is it number of members, financial stability, a prestigious location in the city, the happiness of the congregation? Should we think of human flourishing in another way?

I appreciate the lectionary providing Philippians 2:1-13 as our epistle for this week. It offers a helpful contrast to the story found in Exodus. Paul says it well: “. . . each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” Do you want to know how to flourish as a human community, how to live an appropriate life, how to understand God? Paul says: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” the one who “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Christ did not define the presence of God by his own self-interests. Instead, his self-interests were defined by the presence of God.

Paul tells us that the gospel is rather serious business. It is not something to be dealt with flippantly or casually. Paul’s understanding of the gospel simply

assumes the presence of God, sometimes the terrifying presence of God demanding justice where there is none. Nowhere does the gospel define the presence of God by whether we are comfortable or not. In fact, Paul says the gospel condemns our selfish ambitions and conceits. The gospel must be worked out in our lives. And that is never easy; most especially because the gospel challenges our selfish ambitions and interests.

I did not know, until I engaged in a bit of exegesis, that Paul uses the plural form of “your” in telling the Philippians to “work out your own salvation.”⁴ This is no individual task. It is the community’s job. Paul speaks to the community when he says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you.” You are not alone, even when it seems like you are. The presence of God does not waver. God is always at work, even when there seems to be no evidence that this is the case. Just keep plugging away, even if you have to do it in fear and trembling. But don’t forget to do it in community. The community can remind us of the presence of God especially when, as individuals, we lose sight of it.

In our parable this morning, one son says “I will go to the vineyard to work” but does not go; the other son says “I will not go” but ends up going. “Which of the two did the will of his father?” Jesus asks. God requires our deeds not our

⁴ See Morna D. Hooker, “The Book of Philippians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” In *2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, v. 11 of *New Interpreter’s Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000, see especially 512.

empty words. Rather than defining the divine presence by how well it serves our needs, the example of Jesus teaches us how to be mediators of the divine presence by attending to the needs of others, even if it comes at great sacrifice to our own self-interests. Maybe God is most palpably present in just such moments.

For me these three passages call into question the appropriateness of Israel's question in Exodus 17 – is God among us or not? Our answer to this question is usually distorted by what we *want* God to do in our midst in any given context or circumstance. I suppose this is the stuff of human nature. But if Christians believe in the gospel, we should accept the presence and activity of God as a given. The gospel tells us we are saved by grace, and that grace exists because God is at work in us in spite of ourselves. But, ironically, we are also told to work out our own salvation because, indeed, God is at work in us. Sometimes the work of a theological school can get hung up by concentrating on one question: what is God doing in the midst of us? It is an important question, but sometimes I think we are more particular and more confident in our answers than we have a right to be. These texts suggest we should work out our own salvation in fear and trembling by asking a different question: what are we doing in the midst of God?