

Exodus 17: 1-7 "Are You With Us or Not?" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/27/20

We live in a year which has taken on a life of its own, and there are now more jokes attributed to 2020 than any other year in history. Such as, "If 2020 were a drink, what would it be? A colonoscopy prep." A time traveler arrived this morning and asked what year is it? "2020" we answer. The time traveler asks, "So has it happened yet?" "What?" we ask. "The disaster, of course," says the time traveler. And we say, "Do you have the slightest idea how little that narrows it down?" Finally, for those of you have conspiracy theory friends, please check on them as they haven't had a day off in months! Watching last Sunday's award show, the Pandemmys, as Jimmy Kimmel called them, I couldn't help but laugh when one Emmy nominated cast had the audacity to wear 2021 glasses and toast champagne glasses to New Year's Eve 2021 a whole three months early. As October falls upon us, one can't help but question where has God been this whole year? Do you find yourself secretly grumbling about God's relative absence in the midst of it all? Are you feeling "captive" by our circumstances and "helpless" to change any of it, longing to finally be set free from captivity?

Then you understand the Israelites in our story who are complaining (dare I say again!) that it would have been better to die than to follow Moses out of Egypt. As they journey through their wilderness wanderings, a prevalent question keeps rising up, "Is God with us or not?" It is a question that often starts when we are young and creeps up most dramatically during difficult times. Preacher Sarah Jackson Shelton tells a story of picking up her 3 year old from preschool after work who was often quite talkative from the back seat on their rides home. She discovered, as I remember so clearly, that children learn at an early age it is in the car that there are few interruptions or distractions. Therefore they save their best questions

while they have their parents trapped behind the wheel of a moving vehicle. The conversation began with, "Mom, can we have a baby at our house?" Totally caught off guard, Sarah stammered, "Well, we'll see David," to which he immediately asked, "How do we get a baby, Mama?" Not wanting to provide a reproductive lesson at the time, she said, "David, God will give us a baby." "Well, Mama, where is God?" She cringed as she heard her reply that lacked any evidence of her scholarly training in early childhood and religious education training. For she said, "David, God lives in your heart," to which David promptly put his head inside of his shirt, "Hey God," he shouted, "Can we have a baby at our house?" After a long pause, David informed her, "God said 'Yes!'" Now as if the conversation had not been enough, the next afternoon, once again in the car, the question came, "Mama, where is God?" This time she was ready with a rehearsed answer, "Oh David, there is nowhere you can go that God won't be there. God loves us so much that God wants to be with us at all times." There was such silence in the car that she looked in the rearview mirror to see what David was doing. He was moving his head from side to side as if he was looking for someone. When Sarah's curiosity couldn't stand it any longer, she finally asked, "David, what are you doing?" "I am looking for God." "Well, son did you find God?" To which David answered, "No, Mama, my God ran away."

2020 – the year God ran away! Is this the epitaph we are headed for in years to come? From the young and naïve to the sophisticated and philosophical, all of us are consumed with questions about God and what we can expect from God just as the Israelites were. That ragtag group of slaves are in the early part of their 40 years in the wilderness so they still remember the miraculous presence of God who saves them from the plagues and rescues them from Pharaoh's army as the Red Sea waters split open. But memory is short-lived when it comes to

issues of survival. They have experienced the work of God first hand, they have evidence of God's taking care of them, but now they want personal satisfaction. From a place called "Massah," from the verb "test" or "try" and "Meribah," from the verb "quarrel," Moses complains to God, "These people are going to kill me." In our language, the place would be called "Fussin' & Fightin'" and you may have been there a time or two. Chronic cries rise up from the masses, "I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, I'm lonely, I'm broke, I'm hurt, I'm sick! What will you do about it, God? Are you with us or not?" Their travels have morphed from being stuck in one bodily place to being bound in a state of mind and of spirit as well. Yahweh responds to Moses' cries and tells him to take his staff and watch for God standing in front of him near the rock of Horeb. Again words become significant here as the word Horeb is used only 3 times in Exodus. First as the mountain of God from which the Lord calls Moses to free the slaves, second in today's passage, and third, following the episode of the golden calf, as Yahweh struggles to decide whether or not to continue the journey with the Israelites. In each case, the parties voice arguments and questions with touchiness and raw honesty. Whereas the term "Sinai" is often used to describe the mountain where God is revealed, the mountain of theophany, "Horeb" is the place where deeply personal struggles between God, Moses, and the people are accentuated. Horeb signals to us that this is a place of great emotional energy and angst. There is also one more dimension of language reflected in this text that little 3 year old David probably understands better than us adults. It is in the phrase "among us" within the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" The Hebrew expression means literally "In our inner organs" and so perhaps also something like "in our (parched) throats," "in our (cramping) muscles," "in our (racing) hearts." The Israelites wish to know, like little David who talked to

God under his shirt, if God is present in their midst, and if this presence is more than just a notion or metaphor. They seem to ask, “When we are suffering, does God know it? When we are faint and weary of a year without end, can God feel it the way we feel it? How can we distinguish the voices around us, who is from God and who is not, who speaks truth and who speaks denial, suspicion, and falsehood?” These are questions which step beyond basic survival into what it means to be human, alive, and woke in a time when it is far easier to stay in bed.

If I were to write my own scenario of 2020 so far, I don’t know if I would have the grace to make it humorous. The amount of brazenness which has been unleashed in our world is unlike anything I can describe – overt racism, neo-Nazism, fascism, and outright denial of the election process and the integrity of democracy. I don’t want to be an alarmist, but we have to have these conversations; we simply can’t be naïve. Perhaps some of you have read the book Night, by Elie Wiesel. It includes a story about a Jewish man who somehow escapes the concentration camp and goes back to his hometown to warn his fellow villagers. He cries out to them, “When they tell you to pack up and wear your best clothes, this is a trick...When they tell you to get on that train, do not do it. Run for your lives right now.” But he was haggard, his clothes were falling apart, he was starving to death and he looked like a lunatic. So they said, “This guy is crazy, he has gone stark raving mad.” Nobody believed him, and they got on those trains and went to those concentration camps.

We can’t be naïve. We have to understand the true historical and scientific dangers taking shape around us so that we can respond accordingly, with wisdom and presence of mind. We have to be in tune to our God who rarely appears as we expect, but instead surprises us pointing us in a new direction we never saw coming. At the same time, we can’t let ourselves

be overrun by voices which say there is no hope. When the promotion doesn't pan out, we lose the championship game, the diagnosis is cancer, the marriage can't be saved, the child will never get well, or we get lost in the desert without a water fountain in sight, the easiest answer is "God has run away". Frederick Douglas once reached such a place in the anti-slavery movement when he believed the only option was to seize freedom by force. Sojourner Truth stood up and confronted him, "Frederick Douglas, you answer me this - Is God gone? Is your God gone?" This exchange made her a witness for nonviolence, as well as God's power to overcome even the darkest times. Those who survive the sufferings of this world, who break free from the endless burdens upon mind and spirit, are those who see God, not as a quick fix to a problem or an easy way to numb the pain, but as One who joins us in the suffering, so that through God's presence, we become much more than either our problems or our solutions.

2020 – Is God with us or not? I know what my answer would be, but do you know yours?