

North Kildonan United Church

27th September 2020 – *Rev. Don Johnson*

“Is the Lord Among Us or Not?”

Exodus 17: 1-7

Philippians 2: 1-13

Matthew 21: 23-32

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

Recently, on a YouTube interview, a well-known author and commentator was asked what it would take for him to become a Christian. The author in question had been raised in the church, sang in the local church choir, probably attended Sunday School. Like many, his beliefs changed or shall we say lessened, to the point of him now understanding himself as a Christian atheist.

While he does not believe in a higher power or a deity, nor in Jesus Christ as anything more than an enlightened teacher, he still sees great worth in Christianity. He values the tremendous role the Christian church has had in the development of Western civilization, in the shaping of our laws and customs, in the creation of universities and hospitals, in our approach to civil rights, justice and the dignity of the human being.

All of this, and more, he treasures, but he just can't bring himself to actually believe in God.

So the question was put to him. What would it take for him to believe?

"If I hear a voice" he said. If God were to speak to him, then he might believe.

In my university days, we were taught about the leap of faith, the embracing of belief even though we can't see or touch God. To hold faith and doubt together and to choose faith, fully aware that doubt will always be somewhere, hiding around the corner or standing right in our face. But to still choose faith.

Some can make the leap of faith, others can't. Our friend the author, though he gives all the indications that he would be happier within the Christian church, just can't make the leap, just hasn't heard a credible voice of God to invite him in. Nor, I guess, has he heard a convincing argument that he should embrace the Christian story and follow Christ.

In today's reading from Exodus it seems that the Israelites are still having trouble making a leap of faith.

Think of what has happened to them. God raised up Moses to lead them out of Egypt. God sent plague and pestilence on the Egyptians to persuade them to let the Israelites go. When they reached the shore of the Reed Sea, God opened a way through the water, a way that meant life on the other shore for the Israelites and death for Pharaoh's army. Safely across, the Israelites rejoiced in God's act of salvation, proclaiming with great joy: *"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation...Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Sea of Reeds. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone."*

Then in their wandering, the water they encountered was bitter, so God made the water sweet. Then the people cried out for food, and God sent manna in the morning and quails in the evening. And now, in today's lesson, the people grumble and complain that they are thirsty, arguing with Moses and hurling their usual accusation at him: *"why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"*

Yes, they are thirsty. We all understand thirst, and how impossible it is get on with life when we are desperate for water. But something happens at this point in the story. Their water question, like their food question, is a basic human need. They are in a wilderness. There are no wells handy, no convenient pools of refreshingly cool water just waiting for them. They are in a dry, hot, seemingly hopeless place. They take on Moses, yet again, and demand he fix the situation. The Lord tells Moses to strike the rock and out flows the much needed water. The One who has led them thus far does not fail or abandon them, the faithfulness of God is experienced in the water of life flowing from the rock.

But their water question, serious though it is and asked in their time of great need, this water question shifts and becomes a God question. They dare to ask what seems to be unthinkable: *"Is the Lord Among Us or Not?"*

This is not the finest hour for the Israelites. Day by day they were surrounded by the Lord's gracious provisions, led from slavery to freedom, yet they doubted that the divine presence was with them.

Even at this point, God still loves the people, especially at this point God still provides for them and guides them through the wilderness.

In Voices United this whole adventure is chronicled in the Hebrew hymn *"If Our God Had Simply Saved Us"*. It runs for 15 verses and begins this way: *If our God had*

simply saved us, merely brought us out of Egypt, only opened up our prison: Da-yei-nu, Da-da-yei-nu, which translates as enough.

But God's love and grace did not stop with a mere prison break and so the hymn tells of the opening of the waters and the rescue through to the other shore, of the gift of manna, of Sabbath rest, of milk and honey, the leading through the desert, the giving of the Law and the Ten Commandments, finally ending with verse 15, "*But, our God, who holds the banquet, calls the whole world into freedom: opens up the new creation: Enough!*"

What did God do for the Israelites? Clearly more than enough.

What does God do for us? Clearly more than enough.

Is it enough? I guess for the author I spoke of, what we believe God does for us isn't enough to light the flame of faith within him. No judgement of him, just an observation that perhaps he, like so many others, are looking for more, looking for God to prove God's self, looking for conclusive evidence to the Israelites' question *Is the Lord Among Us or Not?*

For me, what God has done is enough. God has given us the gift of life and the means to support and sustain our life. God has given us family and friends and strangers yet to become friends to share our lives. God has blessed our lives with sisters and brothers in the faith and equally cherished friends and family of no faith. God doesn't need to prove anything to me.

If we choose to pollute the air and the water, devastate the land, mistreat wildlife and domestic animals and each other, if we endanger this wonderful world by our selfishness and arrogance, that is a sign only of our foolishness, not indifference on God's part.

The water flowing from the rock in the wilderness was God's Yes. In a world of No, be it in the form of pandemics or deceitful politics or just outright lies, in a world of bad news, God offers us the Good News of the Gospel. Good News supremely seen and experienced in Jesus Christ. Good News lived out amongst us by faithful disciples and sometimes even ourselves, the Good News of God's yes to a world, to a culture, that too often says no.

God speaks Yes in Holy Scripture and God shows Yes in holy lives.

I want to end with a great example of the Gospel lived out.

William Willimon is a United Methodist preacher, retired bishop and a professor in the United States. I've had the pleasure, and that's the best way to describe it, of hearing him speak on a number of occasions at conferences. In the book entitled The Collected Sermons of William H Willimon, which is exactly what you think it is, there is a sermon from 1989. Hear this excerpt from that sermon.

"I was serving in a little Southern town when the racially segregated schools were integrated. There was a meeting (attended by all the people of one colour) at the town's high school to decide what to do to "save our schools". What could be done to keep "them" out of "our" schools? One by one, angry speakers rose to call for boycott, resistance, even violence, to protect "ours" from "theirs".

There was an old, half-broken Baptist preacher in that town, who had baptized, married or buried just about everyone at one time or another. He was old. His once clear bass voice was now reduced to a crack and a whine, ready to be put out to pasture. He came late to the meeting that night. Stood at the back and listened.

After an hour or so of the racist tirades, he asked for the microphone. The crowd made way for their beloved pastor. He stood before the microphone, eyes slowly swept the gathered throng in silence, then he spoke in measured, sure, certain cadence: 'There is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, white nor black, for there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Go home, read your Bibles!'

The meeting was over. Slowly people drifted out. The schools integrated that fall without incident."

Amen.