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Exodus 17

Hello? God? Are you home?

Hello? God? Are you home?

Come on, God. Seriously!
Where are you?

Are you with us or not?

—

Those questions are real — and old.
They are the kind of questions
you might unearth in an archeological dig.

And they keep surfacing, don't they?
They arise, time after time,
in times of crisis and pressing need.

—

I'm thinking about those questions.
I'm thinking about Puerto Rico.
I'm been thinking about Jacqueline and Vivian,
who exchanged vows and rings here five years ago —
the first same-sex marriage in our congregation's history.

The couple flew from their homes in Puerto Rico
to be married in this church.

That day — June 8, 2012 — gushed with joy.
Some of you witnessed that.
Some of you stood here in a circle of family and friends ...
and offered your hopes and prayers
for Jacky and Vivian's marriage.

I've been trying to get in touch with them,
since a hurricane ripped a path across their island
ten days ago.

Still no word.

150 mile per hour winds.
Feet of rainfall.

From what I gather in the news,
much of the island is in the dark.
And will be for a while.

Of course, no electricity means
low batteries and less communication.

No electricity also means
no power to pump water into homes.

No water to bathe or to flush toilets.

Almost half of the people on the island
are without drinkable water today.

So, if Jackie and Vivian
or any of the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico
are asking (among other things) — Where is God? —
we would understand the question.

We've heard it before.
And maybe it has crossed our minds, too.

God — are you here?
Are you with us or not?

Old questions ...
that never seem to get old.

—

The passage Jack read from the Book of Exodus
says as much.

The story we just heard might be considered
Episode Four of an ancient drama.

Episode One is the Crossing of the Red Sea
Moses leads the Israelites
out of Egypt where they were slaves.

You may remember
how Pharaoh's army was bearing down on them

and how the people cried out to Moses —
*Was it because there were no graves ... in Egypt ...
that you have taken us away ... to die ... in the wilderness?*

And you may remember
the part about the Red Sea parting
and the Israelites coming through to the other side.

Episode Two is Bitter Water Made Sweet

After a three-day walk from the Red Sea,
the Israelites are thirsty.

You may remember
how the water at Marrah was horribly bitter.

And how the people cried out to Moses —
“OK, smartie — What shall we drink?”

And you may remember
the part when God shows Moses a piece of wood.
And Moses throws it into the water
and the water becomes sweet.

Episode Three — Bread from Heaven.

Twelve days later
the Israelites are hungry.

You may remember
how the people cried out to Moses —
*“If only we were still in Egypt ...
where we ate our fill of bread.”*

And you may remember
how manna — bread from heaven —
showed up like a daily delivery.
And how the people ate their fill in the wilderness.

In just three chapters,

in a span of just three weeks,
the Israelites cry out three times.

And three times their lives are saved
in the most amazing ways.

—

And it happens again!

Today's reading — Episode 4 — Water from the Rock.

The Israelites are thirsty again.
(They are walking in a desert.)

And when they camp at Rephidim,
there's no water to drink.

That's when things get a little hot.
The questions start flying.
The people are complaining.

Moses says:
Why do you quarrel with me?
Why do you test the Lord?

The people say:
Why did you bring us out of Egypt —
to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?
Moses says:
Lordy, Lordy, Lordy — what shall I do with these people?

And the people say:
Lordy, Lordy, Lordy — are you among us or not?

Then the water flows from the rock.
Then the people cup water to their hearts' content.
And then they know (until the next time)
that God is with them.

—

I trust that answer.
I love that answer.
I believe God is with us.

But I'm a bit uneasy with
how we get there in this passage.

Because sometimes
water does not come from a rock or anywhere else.

And sometimes
a beloved friend and mentor ...
suffers a stroke and does not get better.

And sometimes
a 47-year old man is lost in a farming accident.

But as hard as those rains fall
they do not negate the presence of God.

In fact, the times I have felt most profoundly
the nearness of God
have been times of loss and uncertainty.

I'm also uneasy with this idea
that if you're having a horrible day,
or a string of them,
then God must have forgotten about you.

"God with us" doesn't work that way.

So, I'm not crazy about ...
the whole idea of —
"If you are with us, God,
then show us the money or some water or a parking spot."

And it's probably worth pointing out
that God isn't crazy about this either.

Because in three more chapters ...
"Do not put the Lord God to the test"
will be on God's Top Ten list
of things not to do.

—

But there is something about today's passage ...
that leave us with something to do.

The way Episodes 1 through 4 go

God needs Moses to play a supporting role.

Today, God asks for Moses' help —

*Strike that rock
and the people will drink.*

And the people do drink.

—

Could God have done this ...
without the help of a human hand?

Yes.

But God doesn't.

And from Exodus on
God keeps letting people help.

Maybe it'd be easier and more efficient ...
for God to go it alone.

But that is not the story
these sacred stories tell.

Verse after verse,
chapter after chapter,
book after book,
God lets people help.

God's power is very often power shared.

Shared with people
like Moses and the elders of Israel.

Shared with people
like the early disciples of Christ
and like the disciples gathered here today.

—

I believe we are "built to serve,"
because God chooses to equip people like us
to help,
to share,
to show compassion,

to spread love.

And whether it's in caring for the Foster family
or reaching out to the seemingly forgotten ones in Puerto Rico
or walking in the CROP Walk today
or helping out at Charter House any day
we are given parts to play.

—

Over and over again,
when the wind blows and the bough breaks,
the God to whom we belong says:

I'm right here.

I've been right here.

I'll help you come through this.

Now — can you give me a hand?

Amen.