

**“Is the Lord Among Us or Not?”**

**Exodus 17: 1-7**

**September 28, 2008**

With public schools having been in session for the past couple of weeks and our Sunday School back in full swing following last week’s Rally Day celebration, I thought it might be a good idea for us to bring a little bit of the classroom experience into worship this morning. So I’m going to begin our time together with a little one-question quiz. Here we go, “What do the following men have in common?” “*Copernicus, Sir Francis Bacon, Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, Rene Descartes, Sir Isaac Newton, Gregor Mendel, Albert Einstein, and Stephen Hawking?*” That’s right, they are or were all scientists and scholars. Smart guys, frighteningly smart guys, guys that are so smart that the mere thought of how smart they are makes my head hurt. But they each had something else in common as well. Do any of you know what it is? They all believed in God. That’s right, all these men, some of the greatest thinkers, teachers, and scientists of all time believe, or believed, in God.

Is there a God? It’s a question that has puzzled, prodded, and pestered human beings since the beginning of time. There have been certain chapters and periods of time that have been particularly eventful and world changing in terms of the discussion. The Age of Enlightenment in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, and the Great Awakenings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in this country immediately come to mind. And around and around the discussion has gone. “*God is dead*” was the declaration of 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Then somewhere near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some bumper sticker salesman replied:

“*God is dead.*” — Nietzsche

“*Nietzsche is dead.*” — God

And this weird sort of theological and philosophical ping-pong match continues to be waged between a religious belief in God and a rationalistic argument against God’s existence right up until today.

In more recent days, the debate has taken to the best-seller shelves of our local bookstores as titles like Sam Harris’s argument against religion, “*The End of Faith,*” goes toe-to-toe with other books like “*The Devil’s Delusion*” by Sam Berlinski, which carefully outlines a well conceived response to

Harris's assertion that religious faith is absurd, untenable, and unrealistic. Around and around it goes, and finally, one just has to admit that attempting to prove the existence of God is tricky stuff.

Is there a God? It's a question that mere science and reason cannot seem to fully answer. It's also ultimately the same question that was being asked by the children of Israel who were out looking for water in the desert thousands of years ago. We have followed their story over the past couple of months as we have read the tales of their release from Egyptian slavery, protection from the Egyptian army, and God's providence of miraculous food from heaven when they grew hungry in the wilderness. But it is not until this week's lesson that we really get to the heart of the matter. For despite all of the grumbling and grouching that the Hebrews had been directing at their leaders Moses and Aaron, it's not until this morning's scripture lesson from chapter 17 of the book of Exodus that they finally ask the question that has been burning in their hearts and minds all along. *"Is the Lord among us or not?"*

Is there a God? It's the same question that Galileo, Nietzsche, Harris, and Berlinski have all weighed in on. However, in the case of God's children in their wilderness wandering, it is being asked from an entirely different perspective than that of science and reason. Why were they asking this question, *"Is the Lord Among us or not?"* It was because they were thirsty. They were basing their opinion on the existence or non-existence of God solely on their own personal state of being.

In each chapter of their story as we have read it, God's children have been complaining and belly-aching to Moses and Aaron (literally), but in their hearts their real beef was with God ... if indeed there really was such a being. What they were asking was, *"If God loves us so much, then why is he making things so very hard on us?"* Again, like this debate as to the existence of God or lack of it that has raged down through the centuries, back and forth they went. If things were going well for them, if they had freedom from slavery, if they had safety from attacking armies, if they had full stomachs, then they were happy campers and they had no problem at all believing that God existed and was standing directly by their side.

However, when the tide turned against them, when they were suffering in bondage, when they felt the fear rise up in their chest as they heard the sound of charging Egyptian chariots, when they experienced the gnawing

bite of hunger and the burning dryness of thirst, they stopped, and they asked “*Is the Lord among us or not?*”

You see, they weren’t coming at the question scientifically or rationally as have some of the other great minds that we have discussed this morning. They weren’t looking for God inside of a test tube, under a microscope, or through the lens of a telescope. They were looking for God in the apparent evidence provided by full stomachs and peace-filled lives.

And I have to wonder, “*How many of us are guilty of the same?*” Back when the Red Sox finally won that historic World Series in 2004 (*after how many years? 86; I thought you Yankee fans might remember*) well, anyway, after the last victory of that World Series, hundreds of thousands of rejoicing fans in Red Sox nation declared, “*The Red Sox are World Champions! There really is a God!!*” While fans of other teams, who shall remain nameless, replied “*The Red Sox are World Champions? There is no God.*” When we go on vacation to the beach and every single day of our week is more beautiful and sun drenched than the one before, we say, “*God is so good to us!!*” But as we sit by the bedside of a loved one who is dying of an incurable disease, we ask in our heart of hearts, “*Is the Lord among us?*”

And we have to ask ourselves why in the world it would be that we should, like the Hebrews, base our opinion of God’s existence on the relative health and welfare of our own personal life? Quite honestly, it’s because we are self-centered and self-absorbed. To base our belief or non-belief in God on our own personal prosperity is to behave as if we were the only human beings on the planet. This sort of thinking leads the farmer whose crops need the watering rains of a stormy day to sing God’s praises, while the baseball player who earns his living playing under sunny skies is caused to question God or God’s love by the very same rainy day. It’s tricky stuff, this question “*Is the Lord among us?*” And it’s not one that can be answered merely through the comfort of a full stomach or the assurance of the scientific method. While each of those paths may provide us some answers, they will never be able to fully prove or answer the question of God’s identity or existence. When Moses met God on the mountaintop way back at the beginning this whole thing, when he asked God God’s name, all the answer that he received was “*I am.*”

And as intellectually and creature comfotingly unsatisfying as that might seem, that’s the best we can expect. As the incredible Frederick Buechner

once wrote, *“It is as impossible for man to demonstrate the existence of God as it would be for even Sherlock Holmes to demonstrate the existence of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.”*

God just is. You cannot prove God, but you can know God. And you might not be able to touch God, but you can feel God. And while you might not be able to see God with your eyes, you can see the effect of God’s presence in the world around you.

It took them a terribly long time. However, after years and years spent in the wilderness and the promised land, after countless days spent so hungry that they hurt, and so full that they felt they could never eat another bite, after countless hours celebrating the joy of God’s blessing, and agonizing over the inevitable pain of life’s loss, the children of Israel came to ultimately trust, understand, and recognize that God was indeed among them.

And the same is true for us today. God is in the rain and the sun. God is in the feast and the famine. God is in the victory and the defeat. God is in the laughter and the tears. God is in life, and God is in death. And I pray that you might see, hear, and feel God’s presence within and around you every moment of every day. Because I can tell you this: Even though it might not always seem so clear or obvious, God is among us.  
Amen.