

Braving the Wilderness *Is the Lord Among Us?*

Exodus 17:1-7

February 25, 2024

Road trips are never easy. In the summer of 2006, just a few months into our dating relationship, Sara and I drove together—just the two of us—from Decatur, Georgia, to Tucson, Arizona. That's a journey of 1,700 miles and a wonderful test for a new attachment. Those miles were a chance to DTR—define the relationship.

We loaded the car with tents and supplies and left before sunrise on a Monday morning, driving thirteen hours to Fort Worth, Texas, on the first day. The second day took us all the way to Carlsbad, New Mexico, but on day three, we took the back roads. We moved a bit slower, and by dinnertime we were somewhere in western New Mexico, or maybe it was eastern Arizona. To be honest, we didn't know exactly where we were. We hadn't seen a town for several hours, and we were on the lookout for a place to camp, or to eat, or both. Finally, we drove by a store—part hardware, some groceries, live bait, and bullets. When we walked into that tiny shop, the screen door slammed behind us, and four sets of eyes turned our way. We were still squinting from the bright desert sun when the man behind the counter spoke up. Three words: "Are you lost?"

"Well, yes and no," I lied. "You see, we are looking for the campground near here." The man looked over at his three friends on the other side of the counter, and all four of them laughed out loud, then explained that there was nothing like a campground, not one that we might have in mind. "But," he continued, "I guess you could camp in the wilderness area. It's about forty miles from here. But (he looked out the window at our aging Toyota Camry) the road is a little rough."

Well, two hours later, just as it was getting dark, a wooden sign announced that we had arrived in the wilderness. Ours was the only car we had seen since that general store. The night had become dark and cold. It was quiet and eerie. As we set up our tents, we couldn't even see where we were. We left the headlights of the car on as long as we felt we could, and when we turned them off, pitch black. Very early the next morning, I stepped out of my tent. I looked around and then up. As my eyes adjusted, they took in a vision so beautiful it stole my breath. The sun was just rising over the burnt orange cliffs in every direction around us. The sky above was impossibly blue. The air was cool and dry. And for a moment, the wonder of it all simply overtook me. I felt suddenly somehow small and yet more fully alive than I had in a long, long time. I remember writing in my journal that the wilderness area is a frightening place to lose your way but the perfect place to find yourself.

So it was for the people of God who wandered for a generation in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. You see, the wilderness was not a hospitable home. Food and water were scarce and often came only by miracles. The people of God became weak and weary. They were fearful and frustrated.

And then they came to Rephidim, deep in the wilderness. So deep, in fact, that the place shows up on no ancient maps. In other words, they were literally nowhere, and in the middle of nowhere, they set up their camp. And there was no water, and the people were not pleased. They were filled not with food and water but with fear and doubt. Full of fear for their very lives. Full of doubt for their leader. "Did you bring us out of Egypt just to kill us?"

The people blame Moses, and Moses the great leader is all out of ideas. He too is afraid, because while there may be no visible water, there are plenty of stones. Moses cries out to God. "This your people, they are going to kill me."

And then, for the first time in the text, God shows up. Simple instructions. "Moses, go on ahead. There you will find me waiting. You will doubt it. The people will doubt it, but I'll be there. And here's how you will know: strike the rock with your staff, and water will come out and the people can drink." You probably know what comes next. Water flows from the rock of Horeb. The people's thirst is quenched. It's one of those powerful provision stories. It's actually repeated several times in the book of Exodus—God's mercy and compassion in the form of manna, quail, water from the rock.

But before the journey continues, Moses pauses in that place to do one more thing. It is this final act in the wilderness of Rephidim that caught my eye. He names the place where it happened. He calls it Massah, which means testing, and Meribah, which means quarreling. Now, sure it's an accurate name, but my question is: why name it all? Why memorialize this moment full of doubt and fear? Why remember it? Moses insists that the people of God must mark the spot where they asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

It's *the* wilderness question. It's a reasonable response to our experiences of emptiness, to our experiences of God's absence. How many of us have raised our voices in the wilderness, crying out to God even as we doubt God's ability or willingness to respond? When we are in the wilderness, the power of fear is real. It is tangible. We can touch it, while the power of God is distant and vague, a memory. Which of us has not been in the place of God's people this morning, questioning God even when the situation seems most hopeless? *God, do you care? Are you even there?*

Have you been there? In the wilderness, posting letters to a nonexistent address, as C.S. Lewis wrote. There's a chance you find yourself in that wilderness

this very morning. Maybe you're struggling to cling to faith as your stress soars or depression deepens. Maybe you've come to expect the worst, to doubt the possibility of a fresh start, a relationship renewed, hope springing up in that desert place. Perhaps you find yourself in a dark night of the soul, struggling to even find the words to pray to a God whose existence you doubt. Or maybe you survey the landscape of our world and find there little sign of divine goodness and power. *God, are you with us or not?*

The experience at Rephidim, marked in the moment and preserved for generations, was critical in the life of God's people. In the wilderness of doubt, the people find themselves. They define their relationship with God. Their honest and vulnerable question opens a path through this barren and rough place. It is their doubt, it is their fear, that opens that route.

Friends, to ignore our fear, or withhold our doubts, is to deny a part of ourselves. In the Gospels, Jesus experiences moments of doubt. According to the Gospel of Mark, his final words from the cross were: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words of doubt reveal the depth of relationship. **My God. My God.**

Friends, a faith that does not doubt does not deepen. And a church that shames honesty or stamps out all uncertainty with forced belief is one that seeks sycophants and not disciples. It is feigned certainty, and not honest doubt, that is the opposite of faith.

Is the Lord among us or not? The question is as current as the latest family devastated by senseless violence, as the cries of people in war-torn lands, as our most intimate prayers of desperation. For each of us will face the question in our own wilderness moments. Is God's love strong enough? Is God's grace persistent enough? Is the Lord among us or not? Is God really with me or not? And whatever it is that causes you to ask these questions, please hear this: you are not alone. Your doubts are no offense to God's sovereignty. Your fear is no rejection of God's love.

Faith is a relationship and, like every relationship, contains uncertainty, periods of struggle, moments of doubt. When we have the courage to name our fear, we acknowledge that true faith is not about our effort but God's embrace of our humanity. There's a reason God's people remembered their struggle with faith, because in that wilderness time, they found their identity. They discovered their total reliance on God's providence. They awoke to God's reassuring presence even when they doubted it the most. Like all virtues, our trust in God can grow stronger when it is put to the test.

Your doubt is no offense to God's power.

So trust this. Doubters—like you and me—are welcome at the table of grace, are welcome on the journey to the cross. Amen.