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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River WI
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Exodus 17:1-7, Matthew 21:23-32

Is God with Us, Or Not?

I brought along a couple of props today.... kind of a children's time for adults, maybe...?

This is a walking stick that a member gave to me some years ago - sturdy and reliable, and beautiful wood. I've used it hiking, though it's a bit heavy. But I like it because it has a small cross inlaid here at the top, so it's a good reminder for me of the shepherding task of a pastor.

Now this is a decorative "something" that Kathy Breitzman made and gave to me - some of you no doubt remember Kathy and Julie who moved away some years ago. Kathy grew these gourds and then decorated and made them into this lovely "thing".... I think of it like a prayer stick somehow, reminding me of faith, hope and love, as written on the gourds.

And here is a stick, a branch, that I chose and then decorated at a very small group women's retreat held at Moon Beach some years ago. I had been invited as chaplain to the retreat. The women attending that retreat had all been survivors of domestic abuse or sexual violence, and decorating these sticks or branches or staffs was part of the time we spent together.

And lastly, these very "technologically advanced" trekking or hiking poles. Kathy Holperin has a set of these, too - We used them as we hiked Isle Royale on a Moon Beach-sponsored backpacking trip on that island in Lake Superior in May 2019. It was something I'd wanted to do for decades, and so these hiking poles remind me of that important and beautiful time - but they also remind me of how much support they gave me up rocky paths and helped me to keep my balance on rough terrain.

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Now, why did I bring all of these things? Well, maybe you've made the connection already in your minds and realize that I was thinking about the scripture from Exodus this morning, with Moses and his "staff" or walking stick.

Moses' staff was the same one that God commanded him to strike the Nile with during the Ten Plagues so that the Pharaoh would let the people escape slavery. It's the same staff that he held up over the Red Sea so that it parted, and let the children of Israel cross over on the dry sea bottom. His was a staff with a history.

In our Exodus scripture this morning, these escaped Israelites had been walking in the wilderness for some time and were tired, hungry and very, very thirsty. I read one commentary that said that walking long distances in the daytime in desert conditions, you might survive only 7 hours without water - so one long day of walking could just finish you off. So these people weren't necessarily whiners, but were probably frantically worried about their very survival.

"Is God with us, or not?" they cry.

First, they turn to Moses to blame him. They blame him for dragging them away from Egypt to die in the wilderness. Forget the fact that life had been a hardship in Egypt. From this point of dying of thirst, Egypt didn't look so bad.

They're angry and afraid and looking for someone to blame. We get that.

"Is God with us, or not?"

So Moses turns to God because he's afraid the people are going to stone him. And God tells him to take that old stick he's been carrying for years and hit a big rock as God commands him.

And so Moses lifts up this staff - and strikes this big old rock and water flows out of it to quench the thirst of the people.

Moses names the place two different names — not something like “Rock of the Flowing Water” or “God Really Helped Us Out Here Point” but words that mean Testing and Quarreling, focusing on the actions and attitudes of the people.

Because finally this story is about that, and it’s about the big question, the cry of the people: *“Is God with us, or not?”*

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That’s a question we often ask in our heart of hearts when things are going badly. Is God with us, or not?

And IF God is with us, then why are these things happening? WHY are ALL. THESE. THINGS. *HAPPENING?!*

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It’s a natural reaction to ask that question, but it’s not necessarily a “faithful” question. Stay with me here.

Sometimes we ask WHY God “made” us ill or “let us” get sick. When things aren’t going our way, when things happen that we think are bad, we assign blame to God for not protecting or saving us. And sometimes we even blame God for not saving us from our own bad choices.

Sometimes we ask God why God didn’t perform that miracle we so fervently prayed for. God, do you hear me, *or not?*

Do WE try to test God, too? Do we require a certain response to PROVE God is with us? For those Israelites, if the water hadn’t flowed out of the rock, would that have negated every other experience they’d ever had of enough to drink? Would that have

meant that God wasn't with them, or that God didn't exist? If in our own situations we require a certain outcome to prove God is with us, are we really *that close to atheism* at any moment where if God doesn't perform the way we want, when we want, then we'll walk away in disgust and unbelief??

In the story, water DOES flow from the rock. The people ARE sustained, but they are sustained - remember - only day by day. *Just day by day*. They don't have anything to count on for more than a day. That was true for the manna on the ground that they gathered for food that God provided, too. The manna in the morning was only for that day - or, in the case of the Sabbath, for two days.

It seems pretty clear that the wilderness lesson here is that what is provided IS enough to meet the needs of the day. We will have what we really need. And God knows what we *really* need - for body and soul *and* for our spirits.

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Is God with us, or not?

Is this the "testing" question in our lives?

This morning, I want us to wonder (like in the scripture) if God has already placed within our reach what we need, if our eyes or hearts could just see or know it...

Because I think that's what Moses' staff represents in this story. It's essentially what Moses has used for years - and probably more so now as he ages - to help him walk over rough ground. It's supported him. He's kept sheep with it, he's driven off predators with it. It's accompanied his life and is probably worn smooth from handling. It's all of these things. But, finally, it's also *just an old stick*.

Yet somehow, it's also his authority. It's also his power.

That's really what the women who had survived abuse were doing when we decorated our own walking sticks. We were making symbols of a woman's own power to survive; to stand up for ourselves; to have pride in our own abilities and trust our guts to say NO when needed. To believe - to really *believe* - that we hold what we need in our hands. That *God* has already placed that power and worth *inside of us*.

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So, what is already inside of you (or in your life) that is *your* power, that is a gift from God to meet that need, that real need, you have in your life?

Hear an example: I knew a woman, in her 60's, who was diagnosed with a painful and chronic condition. She shared with me that she started out just being frankly ticked off at God (well, she used different words) because she'd done everything right. She was a healthy eater. She watched her weight. She exercised. She took care of herself. She was a social worker and helped families and especially *children* in need. And yet, this THING happened to her. This blankety-blank THING!

As she shared, she told me that she'd stayed in her Pity Party for quite a while. Her Pity Party and her Blame God Party. But then, she also rather sheepishly admitted that she'd decided to do what she'd heard other people sometimes did: she started keeping a gratitude journal. She said, "After all, what could it hurt?" At first, she almost resentfully started it. But every night, she just wrote down five things she was grateful for and made those things her prayer and her contact with God. She said she stopped asking God specifically for healing... and only told God what she was already grateful for.

And then one night, she found herself writing down that *she was thankful for her illness* and she wasn't sure if she should laugh at

herself or cry. She was thankful for her illness because it had *made* her think of all the things she was grateful for. It made her think of her own pain as something that helped her understand what it's like to be in pain. It helped her to be more sympathetic toward others. It even helped her connect more to her social work clients in compassion and understanding. It helped her not to forget and always give thanks for the times of physical ease and release from pain.

She changed. I wish I could tell you that her pain was miraculously healed. It wasn't. But she changed and her relationship to her pain changed.

It took discovering something already inside of her. She took what was essentially an old stick, the small little daily things of her own life that she hadn't really thought much about - and started a gratitude practice that helped her release the water inside of her own rock.

Maybe you have something inside of you already (or in your life already), undiscovered, that is *your* power and a gift from God to meet a need, that real need, you have in your life...

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We might look at this same thing as a congregation, too.

This congregation doesn't have a pastor right now. We don't know how long a search might go; we don't know if there's even someone out there who wants to be our interim until we find a regular pastor; we don't know how long this doggone virus is going to affect everything; we don't know how long we're going to wander in this wilderness We don't *know*....!!!

"Shheesh!!! Is God WITH US or NOT?!?!"

But friends, we've got a lot of strength inside of us and around us. We are here today - being church. *We are here, being church.*

We need every one of us - and what each of us can give - to meet the needs of this congregation and its members and friends each day, day by day, in the days ahead. We need each one of us and what each of us can do in our daily lives to serve God's mission in this community and beyond. And there is water in this rock.

There's refreshment in what each of us will do in reaching out to others. That phone call. That greeting card. That "drive by" visit on a porch or driveway.

That prayer for the Search Committee.

That prayer of gratitude for a kindness.

That belief that God is always with us.

Your power - our power - is in our hands and hearts and spirits. Hold on to it. You may think you've just got an old stick, but it's what God has placed *in your hands* to be transformed into water from a rock, into what is needed to meet this day, and the next.

Let's claim that, and give thanks to God for what God has placed inside of each of us to do and be. The Body, the Hands, the Heart of Christ.

Yes, you.

Yes, me.

Yes, US.

Amen