

Is God with us, or not? That is the million dollar question, isn't it?

That's the question that the end of this passage says the Israelites asked at Massah and Meribah, is God with us or not?

In the scene itself, they don't ask that question though, they just complain and quarrel with Moses. But the writer is interpreting that what is really going on here is a crisis of faith. The water issue is a dire one, but I mean in their circumstances, in the desert, on the move, they would survive less than a day without water. But the bigger issue is that they don't trust God, who has already provided for their needs several times on this journey. And so they complain, and quarrel, and question God's presence with them.

We could judge the Israelites, but I think many of us have asked that question before. Maybe not in those exact words, but someone writing our story could make the same interpretation. All of us go through hard times in our lives- we are all communally going through a hard time right now. And I bet, if we are honest, we can recognize that some times when life just seems really hard, we have doubted God's presence, or power, or love.

I hope it's not just me, anyway. Actually, I know it's not just me, because this past week in a clergy group I'm in, someone shared a post in which someone had written, "I waffle between not believing in God, being absolutely furious with God, and being completely in love with God on a near hourly basis and I need the church to be okay with that."

And the response by a clergy member was "You're living the Psalm life." And another comment said, "none of us got this faith thing on lock, we all just do our best at any given moment."

The church, us, we need to be OK with people questioning and fluctuating between love and anger and disbelief about God. Because, the truth is, our ancestors in faith, despite the stories we have handed down to us, of seas parted, and bread from heaven, and water from rocks, were not always so certain of God's presence with them either. You see that in Exodus, and in the Psalms, and in other parts of scripture as well.

It shows that faith is not something you do and you're finished. It's a journey. The Israelites are on a journey from Egypt to Canaan, and it will take 40 years, or remember, that's Bible code for "a really long time". But they are also on a journey to learn about God, the God who called them out of Egypt, and set them on this path, and to learn about their relationship with God, how they are to be, and what they are called to do in the world. And that is a journey that will not end in 40 years when they reach Canaan. That's a life long journey, and it is one that has as many twists and turns and times of wandering aimlessly as the wilderness journey does. And it's one that we are all on, one that even if we are moving forward in our relationship with God, we will have times when we are angry at God, or doubtful, or despairing, times when we will ask that question "Is God with us, or not?" And that's OK.

God does not seem upset by this question in or passage today. Moses is upset, but God simply responds. God tells Moses and the elders what to do, and says, "I will be there", and they have water, and can continue their journeys. Their wilderness journey and their faith journey.

They asked the question, "Is God with us, or not?", and the answer was "yes".  
And when we ask it, the answer is "yes", too.

When we have setbacks, and things in our lives fall apart, when we feel alone, and we wonder, “God, are you here?” The answer is yes.

When we are in the middle of a pandemic, and things keep changing, and we’re worried, and we can’t do what we normally did, and we have to worship over technology, and physically distanced, and we think “God, are you among us, even now?” The answer is yes.

When we, or the people we love get sick, when we travel through that darkest of valleys, when we suffer terrible loss and heartbreak, and we wonder “Does God even care about me?”, The answer is yes.

The answer to that question, no matter how many times we ask it, is always yes. Even when we are angry, even when we are anxious, even when we are hurting. Yes, God is with us.

This was not the last time the Israelites asked this question, not by far. Even after they finished their wilderness journey and settled in Canaan, they were still on the journey of faith we are all on. And then, they started writing down their stories, writing down the ways that they had seen God with them. They did this so that they could remember them. Not so that they would never again ask the question “Is God with us?”, but so that they would have something to remind them that the answer to that question was “yes”.

And what we now call scripture is that gift for us as well, to remind us that God is always with us, just as God was with our ancestors in faith. That’s what our Psalm was about today, using those stories of faith to pass down to future generations.

But I would encourage you folks, to write down for yourself, reminders of how you have seen God in your life. The times when everything is good, write it down;  
when we have one of those coincidence moments when everything lines up perfectly, write it down;  
those times when we see God in the love of people around us, write it down;  
those moments when we are overcome with awe, and just know, deep in our souls, God is there.  
Write those moments down, so you can remember them the next time you aren't so sure, so that next time you ask the question "Is God with me?" you can remember the times you knew the answer was "yes".

We are all on a wilderness journey these days, and we all have our own faith journeys, and may God bless you, and may you know God is with you throughout them. Amen.