

{Reconstructed from notes}

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

That’s a question for 2020 -- this Godforsaken year, or so it feels in so many ways.

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

That most timely question is actually 3,000 years old.

It’s the concluding line of today’s reading from the Hebrew scripture of Exodus, the story of the people Israel exiting enslavement in Egypt to freedom in the land that God had promised.

They were out there journeying in the wilderness how long? [40 years.]

Throughout there’s a motif of “murmuring in the wilderness,” complaining and quarreling about one thing or another. What was it last week? [Hunger]

The Lord God heard their cries and gave them bread from heaven, “manna” which in Hebrew means “What is it?”

In last week’s reading we established that God cares about physical needs, and expects us to do the same.

AND, that God sustains even through struggles and questions because the wilderness is not just about a journey from Point A to Point B, but about *building relationship*.

God reveals Godself to God’s people, forming them into the people God created them to be. That God needs them to be.

Along that long journey, God’s people get hungry and thirsty and frustrated.

They doubt, and they question: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

What’s true of that ancient wilderness journey is true of our wilderness journey today.

The wilderness of this pandemic, and the mass deaths of our fellow children of God.

The wilderness of the quarantine and economic dislocation.

The wilderness of the long overdue racial reckoning in this country and finally coming to terms (some of us kicking and screaming) with how we’ve benefitted from White Supremacy, so now what are we going to do about it?

The wilderness of this fraught political season.

God only knows what personal wilderness any of us may be wandering through.

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

In a “normal” year, this might be our “Backpack Sunday” when we have a mound of colorful backpacks piled in front of the altar, which we then adorn with some sort of token reminding our students that God is with them wherever they go in the schoolyear ahead.

But not all of our kids are going to school carrying backpacks this year, are they?

And who knows how long it may last even for those who are.
Yet we all need a reminder of God's constancy with us now more than ever.

So I thought of something called a "worry cross" which I received as a gift years ago.
It's made of olive wood from the Holy Land and it's soft to the touch;
it's meant to be touched, grasped, to let out some of your nervous energy.
When Miss Frances went looking for some to buy in bulk,
she found these called *holding crosses* – way better!

This holding cross immediately reminded me of that beautiful mural
in the church school hallway outside of my office.
It's this amazing mural painted with great love by Robin Hunter;
it's the story of creation, of God holding the cosmos in God's hands.

I had the privilege of being in dialogue with Robin as she painted it.
In the first version I saw the hands were pristine – a shiny, ephemeral, white.
It was gorgeous. And I asked her to change it.
I couldn't find the right words to express what I was asking for, until I heard myself say,
"Robin, the next time you're giving communion to Bob Neubig, look at his hands."

These hands of God in this mural are modelled after the hands of our dear friend Bob Neubig,
whom we lost just over a year ago.
The late, great Bob Neubig who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty,
to work hard, to dig in the dirt, or to teach our church school children.
The hands represented in the mural are not pristine and definitely not white,
but all the more beautiful for being calloused, worn, and of indeterminate color.

Whoever you are, in whatever wilderness you find yourself,
God holds you fast.
The Lord is among us.

Today's gospel lesson takes place long after Jesus was tempted for forty days in the wilderness.
By now, he has already arrived in Jerusalem on what we would call "Palm Sunday."
He has begun the journey of the last week of his earthly ministry which leads to the Cross.
There on the Cross, Jesus knows hunger and thirst and
shares all the suffering of humanity throughout the ages.
On the Cross, he is lifted high to show us that love bears all things;
that love is stronger than hate, and life more enduring than death.

Is the Lord among us or not?
It's ok to ask that question. Some days your answer may scare you. But it will never scare God.
Hold tight, hold tight.
Even in the deepest, wildest wilderness, God holds you dear.

#

