

## March 15, 2020 Taking God to Court Exodus 17:1-7

Not so long ago there were two high profile cases when God was put on trial. In 2005, Pavel Mircea, a Romanian convict was serving time for murder. He tried to sue God for breach of contract. "He was supposed to protect me from all evils and instead he gave me to Satan who encouraged me to kill," was Mircea's argument. Then in 2007, Nebraska state senator, Ernie Chambers filed his own lawsuit against God, accusing the Almighty of "fearsome floods, egregious earthquakes, horrendous hurricanes, terrifying tornadoes, pestilential plagues," and the like. As we might have predicted, both lawsuits were dismissed. Since God doesn't have a legal address, the presiding judges argued, he can't be summoned to appear in court.

Our reaction is to laugh at such craziness. But in this week's reading from the book of Exodus, we encounter a courtroom scene out in the desert even more dramatic than the charges of Mircea and Chambers'. We could use C.S. Lewis' pointed phrase, "we find God in the dock" God is put on trial. God---his legal address notwithstanding---showing up of his own accord to face the accusations of the people.

The setting is the wilderness of Rephidim. Newly freed from slavery, the Israelites have been traveling from place to place under God's command. They've seen pillars of cloud and fire. They've seen manna rain down from the heavens and quail appear to ease their hunger.

But now they're camped in the wilderness, water has run out, and dehydration for them is imminent. As thirst leads them to panic and that panic into anger, the Israelites confront their leader---and by extension, their God. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die of thirst?" they ask Moses. "Give us water to drink!"

I have to wonder about these Exodus stories. Surely God could have chosen a more upbeat, adventurous lot of people. It is kind of irritating reading about those people on a wilderness journey. "What a bunch of whiners and complainers!" I think. "How could these people be so surrounded by the miraculous but still find reasons to complain? What was wrong with them?"

In this week's reading, Moses apparently agrees. "Why do you quarrel with me? he asks the angry crowds. "Why do you put the Lord to the test?"

The language Moses uses here is legal language. The Israelites aren't expressing concern; they're lodging a complaint. Essentially as described by commentator, Debie Thomas, "they're taking God to court."

But unlike Moses, or me! God doesn't respond to his people's complaints with irritation. He responds with empathy, longsuffering, and even playfulness. "You want a trial?" he seems to ask in the astonishing scene that follows. "Fine, no problem. I'll give you a trial."

The Lord says to Moses, "Go out in front of the people." "Take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand that same staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come."

In other words: assemble your courtroom. Gather your witnesses. Bring the rod of judgment. I will be in the stand, waiting.

Moses obeys, and the water flows, the miracle happens. It is interesting that the writer doesn't describe it actually and doesn't tell us how the people reacted. But we imagine it, don't we. The mad dash towards the gushing water, cupped hands, makeshift containers, the jostling of knees and elbows against the slippery rocks. No doubt, Moses' expression of relief and gratitude.

I understand the miracle. After all, it is not the first big one that God did in response to their cries of hunger, there was quail and manna. What is harder to understand or imagine is God's vast patience. Why doesn't God get angry with those thankless people? Moses does, but God does not. Does the answer lie in the conclusion of the story? "And

Moses called the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarreling), because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'"

Is the Lord among us or not? Perhaps, the Israelites feared that they were all alone. Maybe this whole fleeing from the Egyptians had been a mistake. Maybe they had misread the signs, and God had abandoned them. At stake was not God's existence, but his presence in the details of their lives: is God with us here in the desert? Is he among us when we thirst? Is God still for us?

The 'easy' thing about systems of oppression is that their chains of command are brutally clear. In Egypt, the Pharaoh and his slavemasters were the ones in charge, no question about it. Contrast that with life in the desert---the Israelites faced all the terrors of true liberty. God would not force them to trust him. "I will stand there," God promised Moses, knowing that what the people really needed wasn't really a bit of water, but his abiding presence with them. Maybe the true miracle was not God's intervention, but his restraint. Did anyone look past the waterfall that day, and see the Holy One? Scripture says he was standing there on the rock of Horeb. His trial was now over and his generous nature was proven once again.

God in the dock. God in the shadows. God in the cleft between rock and water. What does it mean that God goes to such great lengths to honour our freedom, even when that freedom frees us to ignore him? It is important to note that God was the one who led the Israelites to Rephidim in the first place: they "traveled from place to place as the Lord commanded." The God who gives us water also gives us the wilderness. The place of strife is also a holy place. And the circumstances that point to God's absence-desert wandering-are often the ones that reveal his presence most richly.

Naming something in the Hebrew tradition-a grove of trees, a well---marked the place as a significant place in their sacred geography. Moses named the watering rock "Meribah," and "Massah." Not, "the source of abundant water" or "the rock where the Lord provided," but a place of trial, contention, and strife. Here in this place where the people of Israel were not exactly shining examples of devotion, the place is significant on the spiritual map of their journey in life.

Is God among us or not? In the midst of a pandemic outbreak of a new strain of flu? Is God among us? We ask the question as if its answer should come to us once-and-for-all, so that if God proved his existence with enough thunder claps and lightning bolts, we'd never ask for reassurance again. That is not the way it works is it? We have experiences of reassurance, but then those tales go stale. This story from Exodus teaches us that we'd ask again anyway. What the Israelites really yearned for---what we really yearn for---is not God out there in the cosmos. It's God right here, in the messy particulars of our lives. We ask again and again because we need to know again and again. Is God among us now? And now, and now, and now? In the parched marriage, the gut-wrenching diagnosis, the shrinking paycheck, the untimely death? In the war zone, the brothel, the earthquake, the drought? In the scorching, shape-shifting deserts he leads us into and out of for reasons we don't understand---is God among us or not?

Earlier I asked, "How could these people be so surrounded by the miraculous but still find reasons to complain?" One could ask that of us in this day too. We live in a land of plentiful safe water. Much of the world does not.

(Trócaire is the overseas development agency of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. We were established by the Bishops' Conference as "an official channel through which Irish Catholics can express their commitment on an ongoing basis to the needs of the Third World").

**In the village of Tisho Kebele in southern Ethiopia, Mechu Dayo woke each morning not knowing whether she would have enough food to feed her children that day.** "Drought has been so severe and I didn't have enough flour to bake to feed my children," she said. "I had to prepare a very thin porridge just for them to feel something in their stomach and survive the day."

Like many people in the region, Mechu (40) had relied on cattle farming, but regular droughts were making it more difficult to raise livestock. A Trócaire project (an overseas development project funded by Irish Catholics) gave 170 families in the area the skills and tools to begin growing vegetables.

Thanks to the project, Mechu believes that hunger will be a thing of the past for her family. “Previously when I went to the market and saw cabbage, I would want to buy for my kids but I could not afford it,” she says. “Now I am able to grow it and then feed my children. I am also making money out of it. Feeding my children and then having an abundance to sell at the market is a big change for me.”

As well as helping local farmers to grow vegetables, the project also improved water supply and irrigation in the area. New wells and irrigation methods have helped the people to cope with the extended periods of drought that have sadly become a regular feature of life for people in the area.

“I don’t think I will face major problems again,” Mechu says confidently. “I can still grow vegetables even if there is no rain. I will be able to bring water on a donkey from a well. The project has helped me reach this stage out of nothing.

**I am very happy. If I had money I would send the supporters a gift, but now I am sending my big round of applause.”**

There is plenty of evidence of the miraculous if we are watchful and listening. I heard a friend, Don this week describe the wonderful refreshment they received recently when they felt so parched at the state of his mother-in-law who has been beyond responsive for the last couple of weeks. For some time his mother-in-law was in a local nursing home. Alzheimer’s has taken her mind some time ago. Family visits have been regular but not for a long period of time as ‘Olive’ no longer recognizes anyone. Just in the last few days Don’s wife, Olive’s daughter has been at the home a lot more because of a decline in her health. They discovered that many of the care staff share their Christian beliefs and have been praying with Olive and reading her familiar words of Scripture and singing hymns that might speak to her soul. This has given them comfort in a dry period.

Is God among us? Yes, God is among us in this present challenge with the coronavirus. We ask it and so register our need, our yearning, and our hope. To ask it is to journey into radical freedom, knowing that the God of both wilderness and gushing water has compassion enough for our questions. God is there, showing up freely, often surprising us as he stands before us in our time of need. Thanks be to God!

*Acknowledging inspiration and  
reference to “God in the Dock,”  
Debbie Thomas, Journey with Jesus,  
September 28, 2014*