Among Us

FBC | WJ

March 23rd 2014, The Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 17:1-7

Will you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing your sight, O God our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

At Duke Divinity School in Goodson Chapel there is an ornate altar table like the one we have here from which they celebrate communion. On one side of the table the word “Alleluia” stands emblazoned in glory as it proclaims the Passover feast of Christ the conquering lamb. However, during Lent the table is turned around to see a very different phrase. “I Thirst” is inscribed on the altar to remind us of Christ’s words on the cross as we mark it each year during Lent.

Today we hear similar words from the Israelites in the Exodus account. Yet again the Israelites are saying that Moses brought the people out into the wilderness to die, and yet again Moses looks to God for advice. God sends Moses up to a rock and has him strike the rock at Horeb. Out of the rock water came, and Moses called the place Massah because the Israelites said, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Now if I was an Israelite, I wouldn’t think this was a bad question to be asking. It’s easy to praise God when the Alleluia is out and about but when I thirst comes along it’s a lot harder to find God’s water of life in the midst of this troublesome existence.

Deeper than hat have you tried to get water out of a rock in the desert? In a world where 1.1 billion people live without access to clean drinking water today water would be something of a hot commodity if it came from rocks in the desert. It’s almost an oxymoron to say that water can come from such a place of death and despair.

When I was a young Boy Scout, well before I received my Eagle Scout award I remember having to purify my water to drink it while we were on camping trips in the wilderness. We’d come to a spring and find that there was fresh, yet unclean water waiting for us. I was ready to jump in and enjoy the pleasure of a refreshing drink. Instead, my dad the Scoutmaster that he was made us purify the water before we could drink it, lest we gain some harmful bacteria or bug in our water bottle.

This is precisely what Lent is about. Lent is a purification process. There is no way for us to get to Easter without Lent, there is no way for us to get to an empty tomb without a death. So we are forced to ask the question is the Lord among us or not? We’ve stop singing alleluia, we’re dressed in black and purple, and we can’t seem to find our way out of the darkness. Is the Lord among us or not is an awfully hard question to answer.

That got me thinking about this church, this place we call home. Is the Lord among us or not? I think we need not look any further than what is going on here than to answer that question. Whether it is the youth group, the WMU, Sunday School classes or our amazing choir who leads us in worship every Sunday. Whatever the case for First Baptist Church, West Jefferson the answer to the question is the Lord among us or not is a resounding YES! Yes the Lord is among us and bringing about a powerful work and deed through us, what an honor, but what a responsibility! We are all here for a reason, whether that reason has been made clear or not we all have the potential to be the answer to the question is the Lord among us or not!

Perhaps this Lenten season we can be a people who remind ourselves that God is at work. God is at work among us and in us and through us. A few weeks back, Michael and I went to Winston-Salem to see theologian and pastor Nadia Bolz Webber speak. Nadia is not your typical theologian. She is covered in tattoos, has a mouth of a sailor and often time is at odds with the institutional church.

Nadia had something powerful to say when she was speaking to us, she said that often times she find herself wondering if the story of Jesus is a fairytale, best left in the fairytale books of her childhood. She said in those moments she realizes that the reason she believes in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is because it happens to all of us every day of our lives. Or as Mary Button said, “We can only begin to understand the meaning of the crucifixion when we take away our polished and shiny crosses and try to locate the cross in our own time, and in our own landscape.”

You see that’s what the living water does; it reminds us of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, it reminds us of the value of our soul. It reminds us that the Lord decided to be among us. How glorious is that?

Is the Lord among us or not? Our own journey in Lent is a reminder that we are strangely thirsty amidst a culture that is full of thirst-quenching opportunities. When the things of this world offer water for us to drink we come up feeling thirsty again. But the water that God offers us is resurrecting water. The things of this earth grow strangely dim and we are found profoundly filled with the water of life. The water full of love and grace and truth.

You know this Exodus account is a story of love. A story that shows that even when we quarrel and complain about the troubles of this life God is with us, and God is for us. God loves us into creatures that thirst only for the water of life.

Is the Lord among us or not? People of faith know that God can bring water from a rock in a desert. If God can do that, what is beyond the realm and reach of God? During this Lenten season we are reminded that God accomplished everything on the cross. There is no height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation that can separate you from the life and light of God.

At my home in Statesville there is a creek that runs when the rain comes. Throughout my life I have often gone down there when its raining and when its not raining. Even without the rain I can still see traces of the water that was there, I can still see the water in my mind’s eye for the creek bed leaves behind signs of the water.

Ultimately that is what our lives should do for us, even in the darkness of the Lenten season our lives should show evidence of the living water that is present. Whether it is a mighty river or a dry creek-bed our lives are full of evidence of the water. Our lives are haunted by the water of life, our hopes, our dreams, our faith is haunted by the waters that God brings about from nothing.

Is the Lord among us or not? The answer is yes even in the toughest darkest parts of our lives. The answer is yes because God is more powerful than our no’s. Is the Lord among us or not is a question we can answer with certainty because when the rubber meets the road we are lost in the water of life that comes from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God of Sarah, and Esther, the God of Jesus the Christ and Peter and Paul. We are surrounded with testimonies that the Lord is among us!

This past week Appalachian State University announced our new chancellor, and while I am excited that we elected our first woman chancellor in the history of the university, I couldn’t helped but be saddened by the end of an era. It was a bittersweet moment for me indeed. You see Ken Peacock our current chancellor is one of my dearest friends at the university. He was the man who called me to let me know I had been accepted to Appalachian, he was the man who took me to lunch when I was having a rough day, and the person who inspires me to be a better human being.

I tell you all this because the night before they announced the chancellor’s position I texted my friend Ken and told him I was thinking of him and I knew how hard transitions can be. He texted me back something profound, in the last line of his text he said, “We still have a future.”

Is the Lord among us or not? Even in tough situations we have a future of hope because God provides for us the waters made clear to us in our baptisms and all the days of our lives. God presents to us a future, just like he presented the future of the Promised Land to the Israelites. Therein lies our hope, our foundation, and our water. Is the Lord among us or not?

A few years back I was in the grips and horror of an attempted suicide. However looking back on it, it was those moments I felt closer to God in a way I cannot explain. I described it to my friend as being enveloped by water and knowing that I was safe and needed to cling to life. Luckily in those moments I realized that I was in trouble and sought help as well. For me the waters of life saved my life and I felt God in the midst of the desert.

What is it for you? What have been those moments that have found you clinging to the waters of life and asking is the Lord here or not? The answer to that question is the answer of our existence. Is the Lord among us or not? The answer is God is among us, God is here, love is incarnate and there is nothing we can do to possibly stop that love from shining even in the darkest of moments. May we be ready to face the desert knowing that there is water in the rocks. Thanks be to God. Amen.