

Is God Among Us or Not?  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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“Is God Among Us or Not?” Pilgrim Church UCC, September 28, 2014 (Exodus 17:1-7)

In the last week there were shock waves felt among Christians when Justin Welby said in a BBC interview inside the Bristol Cathedral that he sometimes doubts the existence of God. Okay don't all faint on me at once! Some of you may be thinking who in the world is Justin Welby and why should I care if he believes in God or not? Well, Justin Welby is the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the 80 million worldwide Anglican Communion. To put that into perspective, the United Church of Christ has around 1 million members, we are a small but mighty denomination. So Justin Welby, a religious leader for at least 80 million Christians across the world said, "There are moments, sure, where you think 'Is there a God? Where is God?'" and then he quickly added, "Probably not what the Archbishop of Canterbury should say." [1]

Welby explained in the interview that he came to Christianity in 1975 after running away from God for years. Yet decades later he still doesn't think that Christians have an easy answer to the question of why a good, loving God would allow human suffering—the question of theodicy. Moreover, he said, “The other day I was praying over something as I was running and I ended up saying to God ‘Look this is all very well but isn't it about time you did something—if you're there.’” [2] Of course peoples' reactions to his comments have varied, with some applauding his courage for voicing doubts when he holds such a public position of power; his doubts show his humanity and are hopeful for the rest of us. Others are troubled that, as he himself stated in a rather apologetic way, the Archbishop of Canterbury questions God's very existence. If he can't have faith in God, what hope do the rest of us have to maintain belief?

It seems that part of Justin Welby's struggles and many of our struggles revolve around how God acts in the world, how can we see God's faithfulness in the midst of suffering and despair? There are many difficult stories in the news—just these past weeks we've been hearing about ISIS and now the military response in Syria and Iraq, about high-profile cases of child abuse and domestic violence in the NFL that point to heartbreaking realities for many families, about the Ebola outbreak in various African countries, and so much more. It's no wonder that people of faith are looking to each other and looking to God and saying—if you're there and most days we do believe you're there but some days these days we're having trouble, please do something. Help us.

Today we will solve for all time the question of theodicy, the existence of God, and how precisely God acts in our world. Just kidding, but that would be awesome if I had that many answers! Though our scripture from Exodus today does shed a little light on the human phenomenon of doubting God, with the author of Exodus writing many years ago, “Is the Lord among us or not?” [3] And this is the question. This is the question thoughtful Christians, whether the Archbishop of Canterbury or you or me, often ask when it seems like God is nowhere to be found especially in the midst of hardships. And it's not a question that gets people condemned or exiled for displaying extreme faithlessness, at least not in this story. It's a worthy question humanity continues to ask: Is God among us or not?

For the Israelites this question was prompted by wandering in the Wilderness with uncertain futures including unreliable access to food and water, essential elements human beings need to live. We hear them question Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" [4] But here's what's amazing—God responds. God tells

Moses, "Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses does and the people even name the place to remember what happened since God responded to their tests and unbelief by providing water to sustain them. Whether it really happened like this or not, the story shows that God is faithful even when we're not. And God is God and we are not.

The people aren't punished for questioning God or even for testing God a bit even though God had already provided manna, quail, and water earlier in their Wilderness trek as we heard about last Sunday. No, God continues to meet the people where they are—in their anxiety, their distress, their longing for belief, and their constant habit of doubting God. That's the deeper meaning of the story. In the Hebrew Bible, God doesn't always show such generosity of spirit to these complaints and certainly Moses doesn't always respond with kindness—"what shall I do with this people?"[5]

But this wilderness generation assumes something quite normal—when they have what they need and what they want, God is with them. When they are hungry, thirsty, sick, or heartbroken—God has obviously betrayed and abandoned them. Don't we assume as much? People don't tend to feel abandoned by God when life is fantastic and we have everything we could possibly want. In fact, when life is fantastic and we have everything we could possibly want then we often fool ourselves into thinking that we don't need God, we're good on our own over here. No, people tend to feel abandoned by God when a loved one gets sick or when a relationship is falling apart or when we feel helpless in the face of pain or when someone we love dies or when we turn on the news or open the newspaper and see truly awful headlines and feel helpless to do anything. And then we may go to a very difficult spiritual place—we wonder if God has ever been with us in the first place. Is God among us or not?

Many stories in the Bible affirm that it is okay to question God. We need look no further than some of the Psalms: "O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit: 'Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?'"[6] We are onto something when we face our discomfort, fear, or pain by questioning God, hopefully not abandoning everything we hold to be true, but allowing ourselves to doubt a little bit. Theologian Frederick Buechner once said, "If you don't have doubts you're either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants-in-the-pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving."[7] And it's true! Having doubts does keep our faith alive and moving, challenging our beliefs and even challenging God can be a good and healthy spiritual practice.

It reminds me of the popular poem "Footprints." Now depending on my mood, I find this poem sweet or incredibly lame. "Footprints" begins that one night a person had a dream that she was walking along the beach with Jesus. Scenes from her life are flashing across the sky and she notices two sets of footprints in the sand, one are hers and the other set are Jesus'. She looks closer and realizes that during the most difficult moments of her life there are only one set of footprints in the sand. The woman turns to Jesus and says that she can't believe he abandoned her when she needed him most, challenging him to explain his actions. Jesus responds that the times she only sees one set of footprints in the sand, well it was then that he carried her. Sweet or lame, I leave that up to your judgment. But I love a modern footprints cartoon. It shows Jesus on the beach with a man, saying, "My Child, I never left you. Those places with one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you. Oh and that one long groove over there is when I dragged you for awhile."

It's natural to look at the hard places in our lives and ask—was God among us or not? But there are also times when God probably feels like God is dragging us kicking and screaming to have a relationship, to be in a place where we engage and question and keep our faiths alive by allowing ourselves to doubt. The most difficult reality is that in those moments when we

may feel abandoned or betrayed by God, that's when we need to feel God's presence most and it's so hard to get there. Yet, that's when we need to recognize that God is somehow present and that's when it's healthy to question and doubt and wonder and struggle and rage and weep and hold on for a blessing. But it's not easy.

In the end, when Moses faces the doubts of the people questioning is God among us or not, Moses stands in this complicated middle position between God and the people. And what does he do? He prays—he prays a short and simple prayer—“help me.” God responds by reminding Moses that he already has the tools to fix this problem—“take the staff which you already used to strike the Nile and use it again to help the people.” Moses prays and he does what he can with what he already has to help address the anxiety and fear of those people lost in the Wilderness. My friends there are times or there will be times when we look around and we look to God and we say “where is God?” If you're there, can we get a little help over here? Is God among us or not? And then we'll pray. And we'll use what we already have to do what we can, knowing that God is faithful even when we're not. Thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] Carol Kuruvilla, "Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby Admits He Sometimes Doubts the Existence of God," The Huffington Post, September 18, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/18/archbishop-canterbury-doubt\\_n\\_5...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/18/archbishop-canterbury-doubt_n_5...)

[2] Ibid.

[3] Exodus 17:7.

[4] Exodus 17:3.

[5] Exodus 17:4.

[6] Psalm 88:14; Psalm 22:1; Psalm 77:6-7.

[7] Frederick Buechner, Quotes on Goodreads, [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/19982.Frederick\\_Buechner](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/19982.Frederick_Buechner)