

September 27, 2026 — Sermon

Scripture Reading: Exodus 17:1–7

Gospel Reading: Matthew 21:23–32

“How Do We Know God Is with Us?”

When I served as a military chaplain in Korea, I heard a story from another chaplain. He served at a military base high in the mountains near Daegwallyeong, one of the highest bases in Korea. Winters there can be severe. Sometimes the snow was so heavy that even supply trucks could not make it up the mountain. And when that happened, things in the PX began to run out. There was one soldier who came to chapel almost every week. One day, he came to the chaplain looking a little embarrassed and asked him a favor. “Chaplain, the next time you go off base, could you buy me some cigarettes?” Now, think about that for a moment. You are a pastor. A soldier who comes to church every week is asking you to buy him cigarettes. What would you do? The chaplain thought about it for a while. “Should I really be buying cigarettes for someone?” But eventually, he did. That soldier asked for cigarettes one more time, but never asked again. That soldier continued coming to chapel. And even after he finished his military service, he and the chaplain stayed in touch. So I wonder: What did that soldier remember? Did he remember the pack of cigarettes? Or did he remember that, in a difficult and isolated place, there was someone who listened to him? Someone who did not first see him as a problem to be corrected, but as a person to be cared for? That brings us to the question at the heart of today’s Scripture: How do we know God is with us?

In Exodus, the Israelites are traveling through the wilderness, and there is no water. This is not a minor inconvenience. They are thirsty. Their children are thirsty. Their animals need water. They are afraid that they may die. So they quarrel with Moses. At first, the conflict is about Moses’ authority. They question why he brought them out of Egypt and whether he should really be the one leading them. The people challenge Moses. Moses cries out to God. He is afraid they are about to stone him. But by the end of the story, the question becomes much deeper. The people ask: “Is the Lord among us or not?” The question about Moses’ authority has become a question about God’s presence. Is God really with Moses? And even more importantly, is God really with us? This is not a gentle question. The people are testing God. They are demanding some evidence that God has not abandoned them. And what is striking is how God answers. God does not give Moses a long speech defending his authority. God tells him to take the same staff associated with God’s acts in Egypt, go to the rock, and strike it. Water comes out. The people

drink. That is the center of the story. The people ask whether God is among them, and God answers with water. God's presence is not merely explained. It becomes visible in something that gives life.

Moses' authority is not finally demonstrated because Moses wins an argument. It is demonstrated because, through him, thirsty people receive water. So perhaps authority in Scripture is not simply about who has the right title, the right position, or the loudest voice. Perhaps one question we should ask is this: What happens to people when that authority is exercised? Do people receive life? Do people find grace? Do people become more whole? That question leads directly into today's Gospel.

The chief priests and elders come to Jesus and ask, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Again, authority is being questioned. In Exodus, the people question Moses. In Matthew, the religious leaders question Jesus. And again, underneath the question is something deeper. Is God really working through this person? Jesus does not respond by listing his credentials. Instead, he turns their attention to John the Baptist and then tells the story of two sons. One son initially refuses his father but later changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard. The other gives the correct answer but does not actually go. The point is simple: saying the right thing is not the same as doing the father's will. Then Jesus makes the statement that would have offended respectable religious listeners: tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of them.

We should not flatten those people into a simple category. Tax collectors and prostitutes were not merely people with private moral failures. They were people whom respectable society could easily identify, label, and push to the margins. Their names could become their identities: tax collector, prostitute, sinner. Once a person receives a label like that, it becomes easy to stop seeing anything else. Of course, there were real moral issues involved. Tax collectors could participate in exploitation. Prostitution carried serious moral and social realities. But Jesus does not point to them because they are automatically righteous or because marginalization itself makes someone holy. He points to them because they responded. They believed John. They were willing to change direction. Meanwhile, the religious leaders saw what was happening and still refused to change.

And I think that is where this Gospel becomes especially uncomfortable. Sometimes we do not reject the truth because we cannot see it. Sometimes we reject it because accepting it would require us to change. If I admit that someone I have judged is responding to God, then perhaps I have to change the way I see that person. If I admit that God is working through someone I did not expect, then perhaps I also have to admit that my categories were too small. It is often easier to question someone's authority than to allow their life to challenge ours.

The tax collectors and prostitutes in this story are not merely people who happen to enter the kingdom. They become living signs that the kingdom of God is already breaking into the world. In Exodus, water from the rock becomes a sign that God has not abandoned the people. In Matthew, people who were thought to be far from God begin responding to God's call. The kingdom of God becomes visible when people we assumed were outside begin finding their way in, when people we had reduced to one label become something more, and when grace creates a future where society had already written the ending.

That takes me back to the chaplain and the soldier. At the moment, the soldier was simply happy because he received something he had been craving. But years later, I wonder what remained in his memory. Maybe it was not the cigarettes at all. Maybe what remained was the memory of someone who listened to him, someone who treated him not simply as a problem to be corrected, but as a person worthy of care. Perhaps that is one of the places where God's presence becomes visible. People begin to feel safe when they know they are seen and treated as human beings. And sometimes grace begins there.

So, how do we know God is with us? There is no simple formula. We cannot prove God's presence simply by claiming that God is on our side. A title does not prove it. A position does not prove it. Even religious knowledge does not prove it. Today's Scriptures invite us instead to look at what is happening around us. Are thirsty people receiving water? Are people who have been pushed aside being seen again? Are people we had already labeled finding their way toward God? Are people encountering grace and finding the courage to change? God stood before Moses, but the water was for the people. And perhaps the people we are most tempted to dismiss may become the very people through whom God shows us that the kingdom is already among us.

So if we want to know whether God is with us, perhaps we should look not first at how religious we appear, but at what is happening to the people around us. Where life is being restored, where the excluded are finding a place, and where people are becoming more than the labels placed upon them, there we may begin to recognize the presence of God. Amen.

Let us pray. Gracious God, open our eyes to recognize your presence among us. Help us to see people not as problems or labels, but as your beloved children. Give us courage to change when your grace challenges us, and make us a community where the thirsty find water and the excluded find a place. May our lives bear witness to your presence in the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.