

3rd Sunday in Lent Year A
John 4:5-42
living water

[Moses] called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Facing the global pandemic of COVID-19, we, too, ask, *Is the Lord among us or not?*

We have guidance on preparation such as social distancing. There is little, if any, talk about preparing our spiritual selves.

Less than three weeks ago, we received ashes on our foreheads, ashes in the form of a cross. We acknowledged the impermanence, flux and uncertainty of human life – and the offer of redemption. And we quickly wiped the ashes off – setting aside the harsh reality the ashes invoke.

Some chose a 'spiritual discipline' for Lent – which is a good thing – but still, there was no thought of spiritual preparation for COVID-19 which only a few days later confronted us here in Washington State. Now we are experiencing a real Lenten journey, giving up some of our most valued routines like coming together for worship, and even coming together in groups of any kind.

Thomas Merton once said, “ I wonder if there are twenty people alive in the world now who see things as they really are...They are the ones who are holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart.”

We are called to see things as they really are, to set aside panic and denial. The reality is the pandemic and its attendant consequences – the disruption of our daily lives and plans for the future, the possibility of economic collapse, serious illness, isolation, death.

What does *this reality* require of me? Of you? Of us, together? I wonder how this time could be a vehicle for God's love and grace.

Spiritual preparedness may be as simple as repeatedly asking ourselves, where do we see, where do we experience grace?

God's grace comes to us through unexpected sources.

The Exodus story is a wilderness moment – not just of place but of mind. The people of God are surrounded by desert, they have no source of water and are thirsty, angry and resentful of their reality. They complain bitterly, and accuse Moses of bringing them out of Egypt to die. “Give us water to drink.”

It is the inability of Moses to change the situation, to provide what simply does not exist, that

sparks the people's rage and resentment against him.

That's a commentary on today's leadership at every level. We should be mindful of our inclination to focus rage, resentment, accusation on our leaders for what they cannot change.

Moses calls on God with rage and frustration of his own, "*What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.*" Pray, ask God for guidance.

God answers Moses simply, "*Go on ahead of the people*". 'Keep on trucking'. What about the scriptural notion in Isaiah – servant leadership? God adds, "*take some of the elders with you.*" And, "*take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile.*"

Leadership has to realize its place is always, in some sense, ahead of the people. Our leaders are charged with knowing who the people are, what their gifts are, what their limits are, what their potential may be. *Include the elders, share the leadership.* In the way of Total Common Ministry (TCM), our shared leadership and trusting relationships lighten the weight of leadership and anchor us in the ministry of all the baptized.

Take the staff with you — Moses's staff is not magical. It is a physical reminder of God's grace. Grace that moves Moses beyond his individual strengths and gifts. In Total Common Ministry, we gather and pool our strengths and gifts, we draw encouragement and hope and share the pressures, the complexity, and the leadership tasks. We are not so much dependent on individual gifts, as we are on realizing the potential – the grace – that takes us beyond our selves.

Does a future *fearfully* anticipated, make it more difficult to believe that humanity has a loving covenant with this God? Of course it does. How might we set fear aside and reassure others?

Wilderness is our state of mind, our fear, our panic– or denial of – the reality of this pandemic. In our real and present wilderness, there is a massive thirst for God. For many, this thirst is for a largely unknown and undefined God.

Paul, writing to the Romans, says, *Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* This God, who comes to us, who touches us in the life of Jesus, gives us inner peace.

Often patients I encounter as a hospital chaplain say something like, God is not interested in me and so, I am not interested in God. They have created a sort of "God shield" that is hard to break through. Yet it is easy to see that what they want, what they are thirsty for, is God's love.

Being part of the body of Christ in times of wilderness includes sharing our inner peace through conversations with others, meeting them where they are in their fear or frustration and assuring them that they too are included in God's love for all.

Paul continues, *We [also] boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

Paul probes a reality we prefer *not* to experience ourselves, that is, suffering. To some, this passage suggests that God *gives* us suffering to strengthen our character -- not a proposition I accept. I think Paul is saying that acknowledging suffering – our own or others – opens us to experience God's presence in suffering, and brings us inner peace.

Grace. I – and likely you – have experienced others who have lived into their suffering, lived into a hope and peace that communicates itself to others. Their suffering gives witness to grace, a power of holiness that flows through them to us.

When we acknowledge the reality of suffering, we may see that things are only as bad as they are – and not as we might imagine them to be.

In John's gospel story of the Samaritan woman at the well, the travel-weary stranger – who we know is Jesus – sits at the well. He has no bucket. It is noon, and, I imagine, hot and unrelenting sun beats down. The woman approaches to fill her water jar and Jesus engages her in conversation. After talking with Jesus, she is so joyful, so liberated, that she abandons her water jar and runs back to town to tell everyone about Jesus. He has no bucket, but he has something else – living water to share with all who ask. The villagers come out to see Jesus, and the woman's faith becomes their life-line to the living water.

If the living water of God does not flow into us and through us, it may seem that “God is dead”, or not with us. It is our own barrenness that prevents us from drawing from “that spring which wells up to eternal life”.

In her book *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, Barbara Brown Taylor offers simple practices to discover the sacred in the small things we do and say. Our present wilderness journey requires us to think and act differently. ‘An altar in the world’ instructs a spiritual openness outside the church walls.

Jesus says that God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. It does not matter *where* you worship, but *how* you worship. In spirit and truth.

Today, even though we worship together virtually and not shoulder to shoulder in the church, we worship in communion with each other. We share the living water.

We want all those we love to be safe, protected from risk, pain and suffering. But our lives intersect with risk and pain. As Paul says, it is often in those places where we most grow and discover who we are.

We have very little control over the risk, pain and suffering we encounter in life. We need not carry the weight of fear and anxiety.

We can entrust ourselves to God's loving care and compassion.

Let us share the living water with all who thirst. In truth and Spirit.

Amen

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