

Readings for Tuesday the Fourth Week of Lent March 24, 2020

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel:

The angel brought me, Ezekiel, back to the entrance of the temple of the LORD, and I saw water flowing out from beneath the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the façade of the temple was toward the east; the water flowed down from the right side of the temple, south of the altar. He led me outside by the north gate, and around to the outer gate facing the east, where I saw water trickling from the right side. Then when he had walked off to the east with a measuring cord in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and had me wade through the water, which was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand and once more had me wade through the water, which was now knee-deep. Again he measured off a thousand and had me wade; the water was up to my waist. Once more he measured off a thousand, but there was now a river through which I could not wade; for the water had risen so high it had become a river that could not be crossed except by swimming. He asked me, "Have you seen this, son of man?" Then he brought me to the bank of the river, where he had me sit. Along the bank of the river I saw very many trees on both sides. He said to me, "This water flows into the eastern district down upon the Arabah, and empties into the sea, the salt waters, which it makes fresh. Wherever the river flows, every sort of living creature that can multiply shall live, and there shall be abundant fish, for wherever this water comes the sea shall be made fresh. Along both banks of the river, fruit trees of every kind shall grow; their leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail. Every month they shall bear fresh fruit, for they shall be watered by the flow from the sanctuary. Their fruit shall serve for food, and their leaves for medicine."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9

The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in distress. Therefore we fear not, though the earth be shaken and mountains plunge into the depths of the sea.

The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

There is a stream whose runlets gladden the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Most High. God is in its midst; it shall not be disturbed; God will help it at the break of dawn.

The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

The LORD of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob. Come! behold the deeds of the LORD, the astounding things he has wrought on earth.

The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

GOSPEL: John 5:1-16

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

There was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep Gate a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked. Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." He answered them, "The man who made me well told me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who told you, 'Take it up and walk'?" The man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there. After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him, "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you." The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well. Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a sabbath.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Tuesday the Fourth Week of Lent March 24, 2020

In 2017, I went on a six month sabbatical. From October to December I lived in Tucson, AZ. The retreat center, the Redemptorist Renewal Center, is located at the edges of the Sonoran Desert. Saguaro cacti grow almost like trees in a forest. When I arrived, temperatures, in the day time, were in the triple digits. It was not the first time I stayed or visited a desert. For more than fifteen years, I visited a priest friend of mine in Santa Fe, NM. My visits were between one and two weeks. Santa Fe is about six thousand feet above sea level and, although a very dry environment, enjoys four full and beautiful seasons. Tucson, on the other hand, has two: hot and dry and not as hot and dry. The program ended on December 15, 2017, with temperatures in the middle eighties. The center was bordered by suburban homes on two sides and mountains and desert on the other two. We shared the grounds with wildlife, hummingbirds, doves, roadrunners and hawks, peccary and coyotes and snakes, lizards and butterflies. For the most part, the plant life was brown and seemingly dead. The only green existed in the saguaro cacti and mesquite trees whose bark and limbs were green. In the two and a half months I lived there, it rained but twice. The transformation of the environment was spectacular! The seemingly dead plant life was raised up, glorified in as little as an hour turning green. The next morning the desert bloomed with color and perfume, the scent of new life. It was then that humming birds and butterflies flitted.

I grew up on the north side of Chicago. I'm old enough to remember the storms of Palm Sunday, 1965. There were tornadoes all through the mid west. The two towns of Russiaville and Alto near Kokomo, IN were mostly flattened. I know this because my Dad had a cousin who own and lived on a farm near Kokomo. We visited her and stayed at her home every other year. In 1965, we visited and I witnessed the devastation there. I had never seen such destruction. I graduated eighth grade in early June of 1967. On the day I graduated, we had a torrential rainstorm that lasted all day. On both these days our basement flooded with inches of water. My great uncle lived in Mount Prospect and did not come to my graduation because of the storm. We visited him a few weeks later. He told the story of how he sat and watched, helpless and horrified as his basement, fully finished and furnished filled with water three feet deep. He had pine wainscoting halfway up his walls. From then on the paneling had a three foot high water line.

I never saw a flood as life-giving. As we live so close to the Des Plaines River, a flood can be a natural disaster. Once, while on vacation in Santa Fe, NM, I witnessed, after a cloudburst, a flash flood which washed away a few homes built too close to an arroyo. The downpour lasted only a few minutes, but the bone-dry soil of the desert cannot absorb much water. Northern New Mexico, as part of the Colorado high plains, is basically a flood plain which channels rainwater from the mountains, via the Rio Grande River into the Gulf of Mexico. An arroyo is a dry river bed, beautiful only when dry. All these arroyos lead to the Rio Grande.

What the Prophet Ezekiel sees, basically, seems to me as a flood. Yet, he sees it as a tremendous gift of God. It flows, enriches and transforms everything it touches. The waters give life, health and beauty to the world. The waters of God's Life turn the desert into a garden like Eden. The symbolic source of life is the altar in the temple of Jerusalem.

The prophet Ezekiel lived in the Diaspora following the Assyrian and Babylonian Captivity. His prophesy can be understood on a number of levels. In fact, at his time, there was no altar, temple or Jerusalem. All of these were destroyed during the Babylonian invasion of Judah. For the people of the Diaspora, the prophesy pointed to the people's return, rebuilding of Jerusalem, restoration of the temple and the re-establishment of the Kingdom in Judah. The Prophesy, for those who remained in the lands of captivity, pointed to their flourishing in Diaspora and the spreading of their faith in God. For us the Water of Life is Baptism. From it our faith begins and our life in Christ can flourish. Only for us, as Christians, the source of these waters is not the temple mount; it is Jesus and his cross. The transformation of the world is found in the resurrection of Jesus. The completion of which will occur when Jesus returns to establish the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom has begun now in all of us. It is working now as well, but we have a way to go. Jesus will show no sign of his coming until he arrives.

In the meantime, as we live and move, Jesus works through, with and in us. Life can seem overwhelming. We face constant challenges and pitfalls. Today we live without social gatherings. All the restaurants are closed. We must stand six feet apart. We can not touch anyone. We constantly wash and rewash our hands, for we can transmit the COVID 19 virus even before we feel any symptoms. As people, all the normal things we do, normally, we avoid.

The crisis has just begun for us. The people of China have lived like this since January. We may be living like this for a long time. We may be entering an exile in place as opposed to sheltering in place. I have to ask, how can this scripture passage speak to us of life, hope and transformation? I'll be honest. I have no idea. Faith does not give clear answers to such questions. Faith can allow one to ask the questions in the first place. Living Water may abound flooding the world but sometimes a flood can destroy too. I chose to seek meaning in this. I chose to seek Jesus presence. I do so because of this same Living Water; It is God's gift, even though I'd like to sent it back.

In the gospel, Jesus heals the man near the pool of Bethesda. As I have heard the back story, the pool of Bethesda was a place for miraculous healings, not unlike Lourdes, in France. The way it worked, people gathered around the pool and waited. People would wait until the still waters of the pool suddenly become agitated. The first one into the pool, after the agitation of the waters, would or could be healed of whatever malady. They thought that the spirit of God hovered over the water to stir the water. In Hebrew, Greek and Latin the word for Spirit means breath. God's breath was the agent of agitation.

Jesus foregoes all the cultural and religious trappings and shows that he heals as God. Jesus needs no agent. He is the agent of healing. He needs no Living Water. He is Living Water, the source of all things including life, faith, healing and forgiveness. Like last Sunday's gospel, the healing of the Man Born Blind, Jesus heals on the Sabbath. He tells the man in this gospel to, "rise, pick up your mat and go home." Both he and the man he heals, get caught by the authorities.

The Middle East, then and today, is seismically active. As I sit and write, I've just noticed that I don't hear or feel as many jets fly over. I also don't hear or feel as much traffic either. The shelter in place situation has some benefit. It's quieter. I mention this because the whole rectory shakes under heavy air or street traffic. Sometimes the coffee in my cup vibrates as well. The agitation of the pool was natural and not an event directly caused by God. I say directly because even though God may not actually have blown on the water, God did create the earth as being seismically active.

I have questions about Jesus healing this man in the gospel. Was he the only ill person sitting around the Pool of Bethesda? If he was, I have no other question. However, if he wasn't the only person there, why did Jesus cure just him? What leads Jesus to heal one and not another? I ask this, especially, in light of the COVID 19! I've said this before. Faith in God is not a protective shield from life's troubles. In this gospel Jesus had his troubles too. He got in trouble for doing what he had to do. We know the course of Jesus' life. All of us know the miserable way Jesus died, beaten and bloody at a public execution. Jesus, in his human nature lived his life as it came too. Jesus is alive today; he's with us today too. The great gifts that faith can provide help us to find meaning in the meaningless, sense in the senseless and mindfulness of Jesus' presence when we feel overwhelmed. The Living water here, too, can come as we process our experience and cope with our disrupted lives. To ask questions, to wonder in confusion and to feel isolation is human. To reflect on these issues in prayer and to bring our troubles before God, even in anger, is our sip of the Water of Life!