

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT CYCLE A

FIRST READING

A reading from the Book of Exodus 17:3-7

In those days, in their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?" So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? A little more and they will stone me!" The LORD answered Moses, "Go over there in front of the people, along with some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand, as you go, the staff with which you struck the river. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink." This Moses did, in the presence of the elders of Israel. The place was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD in our midst or not?"

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD; let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us joyfully sing psalms to him.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the LORD who made us. For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Oh, that today you would hear his voice: "Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the desert, where your fathers tempted me; they tested me though they had seen my works."

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

SECOND READING

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

Brothers and sisters: Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For Christ, while we were still helpless, died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John 4:5-42

Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you

get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go call your husband and come back." The woman answered and said to him, "I do not have a husband." Jesus answered her, "You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband.' For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Christ; when he comes, he will tell us everything." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one speaking with you." At that moment his disciples returned, and were amazed that he was talking with a woman, but still no one said, "What are you looking for?" or "Why are you talking with her?" The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Christ?" They went out of the town and came to him. Meanwhile, the disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." So the disciples said to one another, "Could someone have brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'In four months the harvest will be here'? I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest. The reaper is already receiving payment and gathering crops for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper can rejoice together. For here the saying is verified that 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the work, and you are sharing the fruits of their work." Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me everything I have done." When the Samaritans came to him, they invited him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. Many more began to believe in him because of his word, and they said to the woman, "We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Fr. James Beath's Reflections for the Third Sunday of Advent

First off, I am surprised that the diocese has acted so quickly and decisively for the good of the whole community in the decision to suspend all church and school-related gatherings.

Even though I will not celebrate Mass with a congregation, I will celebrate mass in private, keeping the daily intentions I would have at a public mass, 8 AM this Sunday, 7:30 AM Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, 4 PM Saturday and 10:30 AM Sunday next.

I have also suspended the program on the mass to a later time. A program can keep.

The story of the Woman at the Well is powerful. We don't hear the scandal that accompanies this encounter of Jesus and the Woman. First, she is a woman who is alone. She speaks with a Rabbi in a very public space. This is a cultural taboo. Next, she is goyim, a foreigner; that is someone not Jewish. She was a Samaritan. In Middle Eastern cultures at Jesus' time, an unaccompanied woman was mostly of a bad reputation.

Who were or are the Samaritans? Yes, they still exist! Wikipedia has a good article on this. They, like the Jews, are descendants of Abraham, believers in The One God, YHWH and revered and read the Five Books of Moses. These were the only books of the Bible they kept. The rest of the Old Testament they rejected as dealing only with the Jews from Jerusalem. They worship on Mount Gerazin, not in Jerusalem or in the temple. Their sacrifices are still offered according to ancient traditions. For Passover, they slaughter the Paschal Lamb and smear its blood on the door lintel as in the book of Exodus. They see themselves as maintaining the true faith. For centuries, their community has dwindled but they are still people who carry on the ancient traditions of their ancestors. Under kings Saul, David and Solomon, the nation was united as one. Under Solomon's son, King Rehoboam, the kingdom split into two kingdoms, Judah in the south, with Jerusalem as its capital and Israel in the north, with Samaria as its capital. The division was partly political and religious. Both claimed the Hebrew traditions and were people of the covenant. Israel was invaded and captured by the Assyrians. They were the first to be taken into captivity and exile in 720BC. 140 years later, the Babylonians did the same to Judah and its people.

We know, from the bible that the people of Judah returned to Jerusalem in about 520BC and rebuilt the temple, we have no such date as to the return of the people to Israel. The Samaritans, to this day, maintain that they are those people, still God's people of the covenant. Their relationship to Judaism is like the relationship of Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox Christians who maintain that they are the One True Church. Both Jews and Samaritans maintain the other is not God's Chosen. Although both groups have common roots, the Jews see the Samaritans as having mingled and intermarried with the foreigners the Assyrians brought to Israel and the Samaritans see the Jews as people who mingled and intermarried with the foreigners with whom they lived in exile.

This is the milieu of the encounter of Jesus and the Woman at the well. If we listen to their dialogue, we can hear the animosity of the two cultures. Jesus first asks her for water; he has no bucket and is alone. She complies and the dialogue begins. They state their beliefs and Jesus tells her of her life. He mentions the six men in her life, five being husbands and one a lover.

There are some biblical scholars who note the five is the number of the books of Moses. Jesus uses her life as a symbol of religious differences. Jesus changes the subject by speaking of Living Water. This hooks the woman into talking more. Slowly she comes to see Jesus as the Messiah, which the Samaritans expect as well as Jews. This movement we can note in the way she speaks to Jesus. First, she calls him a Jew, then she calls him Sir. This continues as she refers to him as a Prophet then mentions the Messiah with a sense of wonder and awe.

This is a story of this Woman's journey of Faith. She meets Jesus, discovers who he is and then goes to spread this Good News. She moves from apprehension to curiosity to wonder and awe to Belief. She then becomes a missionary. Another word for that is Apostle, one who is sent to spread the gospel. Even though she acts as an apostle the real apostles seem not to get it. They have no idea when they return to what Jesus has brought about in the woman. They see a foreign, pagan woman and not a colleague who shares their mission.

Last week, the disciples Simon Peter, brothers James and John witnessed Jesus as God and Messiah in the Transfiguration. Their shared, mystical experience was spectacular. The Woman at the well experienced the same sort of thing without any such special effects. The gospel of John's story is subtle, sublime and occurring through nothing more than a simple conversation. Her encounter is more consistent with common, everyday human experience. It is no less beautiful or powerful than the Transfiguration. It is also more approachable for us.

Jesus responded to her as a real person with whom he formed a relationship. She responded to Jesus as well. The interaction transformed her life and opened the door to our non-Jewish ancestors to encounter Jesus through faith. With our experience of the Christian Faith today, it is easy to forget that almost all of the church in its earliest time was Jewish. It only began to become more and more gentile after about 70-71AD with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans after the final revolt of the Jewish People. The split began and took a few generations, but the very early Church consisted of Jews who believed in Jesus but still practiced Judaism. Sts. Peter and Paul reflect this in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. St. Paul says that he is a practicing Jew in some of his letters as well. The gospels clearly show Jesus to be a good and practicing Jew going so far as calling him, Rabbi.

They return and find Jesus in conversation with this disreputable gentile woman. They are horrified! This is a scandal that has contaminated their leader! Jesus has been rendered ritually impure. They endeavor to quarantine Jesus to no avail for the damage has been done. The lads don't get it they didn't notice the profound transformation in the Woman at the Well by coming to Faith in Jesus. Nor do they know of her profound witness to come to the rest of the Samaritan community. They can't know that these Samaritan converts to Christ will pave the way to the gentile believers that are now us!

It is typical of the Gospels to portray the twelve lads as being a bit slow. Since Tradition tells us that they were the first clergy and bishops, as a member of the clergy, myself, I am not surprised.

What is Living Water in our lives? Is it now hand sanitizer or soap and water? Who is Jesus to us? Is it someone we can only encounter in church? Since the suspension of gathering for Mass

where is Jesus? More fundamentally, how can a loving God create and allow a deadly virus, COVID 19, into the world?

Unfortunately, our faith cannot address those questions. I don't completely know my own mind, heart, and motivation. How can I know God's?

I have always found that Faith helps me to find meaning in the meaningless and significance in the senseless. The living water in my life flows through these kinds of things. I have found that I can encounter and know Jesus through my relationships with others. Now, since we avoid others, currently, and cannot gather together perhaps the reason we don't gather could be a point of focus. We do this for the common good. Just as someone can infect me, I can also infect others. What makes the difference of a good deed and an act of faith aside from the Grace of God? Perhaps awareness of God's presence and the intention to live and reflect that presence.

In the story of Jesus and the Woman at the Well, Jesus' encounter transforms enmity into trust and establishes a Faith a mission that the apostles will not know or embrace until Pentecost. She knows Jesus as the Living Water that now flows through her to others. She can never be the same.

For us, Living Water comes through the waters of Baptism and grows as we become connected through our experiences of living through the eyes of Faith. Perhaps, as we hear of the Vatican saying that the public will be excluded from its Holy Week and Easter services and us not gathering together for social events, study, prayer or worship, our sense of Resurrection may become more profound when we can again gather together.

This is an adaptation of the homily I would have given for the Third Sunday of Lent. (I have to do something while not washing my hands and practicing social distancing for the foreseeable future.

Rev. James D. Beath