

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent

Readings: Exodus 17:1–7; Romans 5:1–11 & John 4:5–42

In last Sunday's sermon, I suggested that we come to "true faith" through experiences of God rather than through teaching, and I cited Abraham as an example of someone who came to faith through an experience of God alone. I also spoke about how the Apostle Paul used the example of Abraham to support his argument that people are "justified by faith," which is to say that people are brought into a right relationship with God, not by their own actions, but rather by the grace of God.

Well, in our first reading today, from the Book of Exodus, we hear that the ancient Israelites, who were rescued from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, are still lacking in faith, even though they have undergone significant, firsthand experiences of God!

First, God enabled them to escape the army of Pharaoh by crossing through the Red Sea, and then, when they were suffering from hunger in the wilderness, God rained down quails upon them for meat, and provided them with manna from heaven. Now they don't have any water, but instead of trusting in God to save them, as He has done so twice already, they complain to Moses that they are about to die from thirst. God responds by once again saving the Israelites, when he provides water from the rock at Horeb.

What might this story have to say to us about faith and human nature? I think it suggests that it's easy to have faith when everything is going well in life, but when trouble and hardship come, our faith is then put to the test.

The Apostle Paul addresses this issue in today's reading from the Letter to the Romans. Paul begins by saying that by the grace of God, which is the gift we have received in the form of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we "have peace with God." This is another way of saying that we have been reconciled with God now here on earth. Paul argues that since we know that we have been reconciled with God, we can then boast knowing that we will also share in God's glory, meaning we will share eternal life with God.

However, being reconciled with God doesn't mean that we are exempt from the sufferings of this world. Paul tells us that we should face these sufferings in the same way that we embrace the peace that comes from the knowledge that we've been reconciled with God. And Paul tells us that God enables us to face these sufferings through the strength He has given us, which comes in the form of the Holy Spirit who lives within us. God has filled our hearts with His love, through the

Holy Spirit “who has been given to us.” That is what gives us the strength to cope with the sufferings that we are challenged with in our lives.

Our gospel reading for today, which is from the Gospel of John, also has somewhat of a parallel with the first reading from the Book of Exodus. In the reading, we hear the story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well in the Samaritan town of Sychar. Now as I’ve mentioned many times previously, the Jewish people of Jesus’ day did not enjoy good relationships with Samaritans. The Samaritans were descendants of the Northern tribes of Israel, but after the Assyrians conquered the Northern tribes and sent a good deal of the population into exile, many of those who remained entered into mixed marriages with foreigners who settled the land, and they were therefore viewed by the Jews as being unclean.

Conservative ancient practice looked down on men speaking at any length with women who were not relatives. So, not only is Jesus doing something controversial by speaking alone with a woman who is not his relative, but to make matters even worse, that woman is a Samaritan!

We also hear that the woman’s reputation is somewhat questionable. She has been married five times, and the man she is currently living with is not her husband. That is perhaps why she is alone in the middle of the day drawing water from the well. She has probably been shunned by the other women in the town. This just adds to the dubious situation we find Jesus in.

Leaving all that aside, during his conversation with the woman, Jesus tells her that he can give her “living water.” Now in the Old Testament, God is referred to several times as the “fountain of living water.” And in the story from the Book of Exodus, of the Israelites complaining about dying of thirst in the wilderness, we hear that after Moses strikes the rock at Horeb with his staff, God causes water to flow from the rock which obviously gives life to, and sustains, the Israelites.

In today’s gospel passage, Jesus is talking about the life giving water that comes from being reconciled with God. He himself describes it this way: “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (John 4:14 NRSV) Jesus, that is God, gives life to us and sustains us. Even when we are faced with suffering, God has given us the strength we need to endure that suffering. That strength is the gift of the Holy Spirit. As Paul says, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”