

Third Sunday in Lent March 12, 2023 Year A

In our reading from Exodus, the Israelites are traveling in the wilderness. They camped at Rephidim where there is no water. This situation is obviously life threatening. The people confront Moses and demand that he give them water to drink. They imply that Moses' leadership is ineffective and incompetent. They blame him for instigating the Exodus and putting them in this position. Does Moses have a spigot he can turn on at will?

Their quarrel is really with God. Moses tells them that they are testing God. They seem to think that God is not with them if he can't meet their demands. According to the Interpreters' Bible Israel has collapsed God's promise into its own wellbeing and refuse to allow Yahweh any life apart from Israel's wellbeing.

They should have known better. They had seen all the plagues God brought on Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea and God provision of Manna and quails in the wilderness. They however, want proof. Is God with us or not?

Moses pleads with God for help and asks what to do. God provides a solution. Moses is to take the staff he used to strike the Nile and strike the rock at Horeb. He does so and water flows from the rock. Moses obeyed God and got a miracle.

The story is really about Israel's lack of faith in the presence and sovereignty of God. There is a strain of Christianity that believes that the proof of God's favor is wealth and power. Is God Israel's servant or is Israel God's servant? Is God our servant? Do we think God is with us only if he meets our needs? If that is the case then our view of God is too small.

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans expresses the heart of the Gospel. In it Paul tells the Church of Rome that they are justified (or put in a righteous status) before God through the death of Jesus. We are reconciled to God. Some people seem to picture God the Father as a stern, exacting, and punishing judge of sin. They believe that Jesus' death satisfied God's wrath so we can avoid Hell. This has been called salvation as fire insurance. But it is not enough to just avoid Hell. Our state of soul must be changed as well. We need to be right with God on the inside.

It is Jesus' risen life that changes our state of heart. The process by which this happens is called sanctification. By the work of the Holy Spirit within us, we are enabled to overcome temptation and be clothed in God's grace.

To quote Barclay, "Jesus did not come to change God's attitude to men; he came to show what it is and always was. He came to prove unanswerably that God is love!" Paul puts it this way; "But God proves his love for us in that while we still are sinners Christ died for us."

Our Gospel for today is very familiar. So familiar in fact that we can miss how radical Jesus' words and actions actually were.

In his time Jews and Samaritans despised each other. The reason for this was the defeat of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 720 BCE. As was the usual practice, most of the Israelites were taken to Media. These are the lost tribes of Israel. They never returned. In their place the Assyrians imported other people. The small number that were left in Samaria intermarried with the newcomers.

By doing this they lost the right to be considered as Jews. When the Southern Kingdom returned from exile in Babylon, the Samaritans offered to help them rebuild Jerusalem. They were contemptuously rejected as not being Jews. Beside all this the Samaritans worshipped on Mt Gerizim not in Jerusalem.

Here Jesus was breaking down barriers. The shortest way to travel between Galilee and Jerusalem was through Samaria. Most Jews especially Rabbis would have taken another route to avoid contamination. He was tired from traveling, and probably thirsty, Jesus stopped to rest in Sychar at Jacob's Well. It was the hottest time of the day. A Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well. Jesus asked her for a drink.

A second time Jesus breaks down a barrier. The woman astonished that a Jew would ask her for a drink. First of all she is a Samaritan and Jews generally avoided all contact with Samaritans. Secondly, she was a woman. Rabbis by conservative tradition would not speak to an unknown woman in public.

Having found a approachable Jewish Rabbi, the Samaritan woman continues her conversation with Jesus. He tells her that if she only knew who was speaking to her, he would give her living water. He is speaking spiritually. It's in Psalm 4, "My soul is a thirst for God, a thirst for the living God. When shall I appear before the presence of God". She takes him literally. She asks where he gets this living water since he has no bucket to draw from the well. Jesus tells her to call her husband. She says she has none. Jesus proceeds that she is right and the man she has now is not her husband. How does he know this?

From this statement she perceives Jesus as a prophet. So she tests him theologically with a question about the proper place to worship. Jesus responds that true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. She tells him that when the Messiah comes, he will explain everything. Something remarkable happens. Jesus tells her that the one speaking to her is He. He is rarely this forthcoming about his identity.

She leaves her water jar and goes back to the city when the disciples return. She tells the people to come and see a man who told her the truth about herself and did not condemn her. They left the city to see for themselves. He stayed with them for two days at their invitation. Many believed not only because of her witness but because of his work. They came to realize that Jesus was indeed the savior of the world.

Consider how this came to be. Jesus was radically open to those who were outside the bounds of his own community. He broke taboos against speaking to a woman in public and having anything to do with Samaritans. Again, people were more important to him than fear of contamination by outliers. The woman had personal experience with one who accepted her as she was, who listened to her and answered her questions. He gave her respect. This affected not just her but her community through her witness. Isn't this a model of evangelism?

I'll end with a quote from Barclay, "Here was Jesus breaking through the barriers of nationalism and orthodox Jewish custom. Here is the beginning of the universality of the Gospel, not in theory, but in action".