

## **Third Sunday in Lent**

**March 15, 2020  
Southampton, MA**

### **OPENING OURSELVES TO GOD**

When the world seems wild, unpredictable, and uncertain, we turn to you, O God, our rock and our salvation. We pause in our journey to find refuge in You. Feed us and slake our thirst with living water. Lead us out of the storm to find true peace.

### **PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Gracious and generous God, when we suffer, when we struggle, we forget whose we are. We bemoan our suffering. We lament that the world is against us. We can't see because we're lost in our own darkness. Lift our darkness, O God. Open our eyes to see anew and show us your way. Forgive us our despondency. May we find hope from our suffering. Open us to possibilities we did not know before. Amen.

### **SCRIPTURE READINGS**

#### **Romans 5:1-11 (NRSV)**

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and 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.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

#### **John 4:5-42 (NRSV)**

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that 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 have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well,

and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never 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 him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no 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 see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these 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 Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

## **REFLECTION**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I lament that we could not worship as one body today. During times of uncertainty, we need to come together to sustain each other with courage and strength. Because we are of like mind in Christ, let us take comfort in

knowing that we are bound together by the Holy Spirit, even as we are apart from each other.

This Covid-19 virus situation has fallen upon us. A few days ago we could not have imagined how it presses down on us and disrupts our lives. Events cancelled. Schools dismissed. Performances suspended and theaters dark. Museums closed. No sports events. Like us, many congregations are not gathering for worship today.

Call it what you will, lives upended, rug pulled out from under our feet, within a span of days our lives have changed. Let's add that this change comes about from a potentially lethal virus that has spread rapidly across the globe. Although in fairness, we don't know how lethal as scientists are studying it now. Nevertheless, there are no known therapies specifically for it and a vaccine to inoculate people is a year to eighteen months away and that's optimistic, thus mortality looms.

It is disorienting and generates anxiety and fear. What seemed certain as recently as a week ago is no longer. When we get a spate of bad news, an antidote is some sort of diversion. Except, those diversions ... well, maybe we can curl up in a fetal position and binge watch on Netflix because everything else is cancelled.

Frustration. Anger. We can't really plan for what comes after this passes because we don't know when it will end. We have no models to follow. We're managing as we fly by the seat of our pants. We hope for the best.

We may not think of this as suffering, but we are. Covid-19 weighs upon our hearts and minds. It has broken our normal rhythms of life. We don't want this suffering or any suffering for that matter. Paul, however, offered that it is redemptive, "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and 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." (Rom. 5:3b-5)

Where do we find hope in times of suffering? We're consumed by the pain, anxiety, uncertainty, and fear. We focus on wanting it over and finished. We know this is undeserved.

What saves us is living water. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that she will never thirst when she drinks living water. Living water is the lessons of our faith. We know it through Jesus' teachings, life, and ministry. It regards all people, even the Samaritans in our lives, as worthy of love and compassion. It weaves humility and gratitude into our daily living. It calls for patience. It reminds us that a lot of life is beyond our control.

Beyond washing our hands and not touching our faces and avoiding large gatherings and refraining from hand shaking, we can put living water into action.

Practice deep prayer remembering that prayer is not our requests of God, but our conversation with God. Sometimes we need to stop talking to God and listen for God. Let's also acknowledge that there are different prayer practices so if you've not felt a lot of success with one prayer practice, try another. Some people will engage scripture and prayer together, such as through a practice known as Lectio Divina.

If prayer doesn't work, try meditation, which is more than just sitting still. Meditation is a way to still our entire being. Just like different forms of prayer, there are different types of meditation. Sitting and concentrating on the breath. Guided meditation with imagery. Walking meditation. There are even meditation apps for your phone.

Meditation intertwines with mindfulness. A discussion on mindfulness is its own dissertation. A shorthand description, though, is being intensely present in the moment. We can practice mindfulness wherever and whenever. When we sit in meditation and concentrate on our breath, feeling the breath as we draw it in and as we exhale it out takes mindfulness. During our walking meditation, we are mindful as we pay attention to how we move from heel to toe. When we're mindful, we let go of all that weighs us down over which we have no control. As an example, the administration's response has been inadequate at best, but it's futile for me to be angry about it because I need to concentrate on what I can do now. Furthermore, though I am concerned about what lies ahead and will try to plan for it, I can't obsess over it either because I honestly have no control over it. A different example. Suppose you wake up earlier than usual and you see dawn. You can swear and curse that you got up too early or you can sit in awe of dawn's beauty.

And that's another way to manage this present virus situation. Instead responding negatively to suffering, we can reframe it as a positive. So, the typical distractions, such as performances, museums, or sports events, are cancelled or closed. Maybe we can take a walk and during that walk be completely aware of our surroundings: bird songs, cloud shapes, the breeze on our face. Maybe we become attentive to the color of the light. Doing this we find grace, which elevates the pedestrian experiences of life into moments of beauty and awe.

Reframing opens us to seeing our present suffering from a different perspective. Sometimes it lends itself to humor, which can relieve anxiety. I can attest from experience that working in hospice can be grim. I use humor with families when it seems right. I remember several years ago working with two older women whose mother was dying. They wondered because their mom loved her pets if animals went to heaven. I replied:

Every person and every animal that dies goes to heaven where God awaits them at the gate. When they arrive God asks them to tell their story about life in this world.

One day a cat came to the gate. "Tell me about your life," said God. "I was a barn cat. I slept on the straw and had to chase small animals like mice for my food. It was usually too cold or too hot.

Upon hearing that God said, "Follow me." God took the cat down a long corridor and showed him a satin pillow. "This pillow is yours for all eternity." Well, the cat was very grateful. It circled the pillow a couple of times and then settled upon it with a big smile.

Upon returning to the gate, three mice came up. "Tell me about your life," said God. One of the mice said, "We don't eat a lot of food, but we've got to eat. When the woman saw us in the kitchen, she chased us with a broom and swatted at us. We were always running away."

God thought for a moment and gave them roller skates. They took off down the corridor.

About a week later God checked on all the new arrivals. When he got to the cat, he asked, “How are things?” The cat replied, “I can’t believe this is mine. It’s so soft and smooth. The temperature here is perfect and those meals on wheels are a nice touch.”

Reframing also takes what is a terrible situation and plants a seed of hope. We’ll find that seed when we press pause in the midst of our suffering to open ourselves to hear God and to see possibilities we didn’t imagine. For me, politically, I hope that this medical situation underscores the inadequacy of our present healthcare system and that our political leadership will take clear steps to get us much closer to universal healthcare and to ensure every worker gets paid sick leave. More importantly, though, I hope that this situation makes clear that we are all in this life together. There is no distinction between rich and poor. There is no distinction between race and ethnicity. There is no distinction in sexual identity. No distinction between nationalities. No distinction between those with power and those without. This situation makes clear that our best protection is each other and that should always seek to support, nurture, and sustain the common good.

Though Covid-19 poses a significant threat and is a looming presence in our daily lives now, when we embrace the common good by living it out, we resist the virus. This resistance does not ensure our inoculation, rather this resistance reminds us and our community that we are stronger than this virus. We can actively resist when we live compassionately and let love guide us and keep our fears at bay. We can support people, family and friends, who are quarantined. We can be present by completely enjoying the company of friends and family, who are healthy, over a meal or even a walk together. In short, when we offer each other living water, we will not thirst and hope will abound.

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Loving and merciful God, may we share the living water we received from Jesus with all the people in our lives and all the people we meet. Amen.