

“Pay Attention to Your Thirst”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia/Facebook Live

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Lent 3A

Exodus 17:1-7

John 4:5-15, 19-26, 39-42

Our lesson in the Hebrew Bible puts us right smack dab in the middle of the wilderness. The lectionary invites us to wander with the people who don't know where they are, they don't know who they are, and they don't know where they are going. Wow, I feel understood, how about you? There is no doubt we are in the wilderness right now. Where are we? We aren't in our cozy and familiar sanctuary. We are meeting together on screens: Tablets, smartphones, and computers. Who are we? We once knew ourselves to be people who go to school and go to work, people who volunteer to serve the hungry, people who socialize with our friends in parties or bars or on the playground. It seems in only a matter of days, hours even, all that has changed. Who are we without those associations? And where in the world are we going? There is no map for this. We do not know what the promised land will look like, or how long it will take until we are safe on Canaan's side: will it be 2 weeks? Will it be 40 days? We just do not know. All we can see right now is a desert: a place where our safety requires isolation; a place where bad news gets worse by the hour; a place where we are afraid. And, apparently at the top of some people's worries, a place where it is possible we could run out of toilet paper.

When the Hebrews were in the wilderness, all they could see was what they lacked. They even started imagining the comforts of slavery in Egypt, asking Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” They grumbled, “Is the Lord with us or not?”

I imagine some of you might be asking that question as well. Is the Lord with us or not? It is a fair question to ask when we are hurting. Where is God? And while I **do not actually believe** that God is pulling the strings on this one, causing COVID-19 to happen and allowing some people to get sick and others to survive, sometimes I do want to have a word with God. I have shed tears. I have had sleepless nights, or nights when I do sleep but awake with dread as I remember how our world has changed. I want **proof** that God is with us. And that is what I am praying for these days.

If you look back to our wilderness ancestors, the Hebrews, you will find that God showed up for them, but in unexpected places. No one expects that you would find water from a rock. And yet, when Moses struck the rock at Horeb, as God commanded him, a spring of water came gushing forth. Of course after that he called the place *Massah*, which means test, and *Meribah*, which means quarrel, which reminds me of the stories I have heard of what happens at the Shop-Rite or the Costco when a poor grocery employee restocks an empty shelf.

In our gospel, we also find mercy and grace in unexpected places. The encounter between a Samaritan woman and Jesus, who was not only a Jew, but also a man, from a tribe that had generations of baggage that was mixed in with ethnic stereotypes, religious bias for their different worship practices, and stories filled with assumptions unmatched by relational experience. But as it turns out, they had something in common: they were both thirsty. She was drawing water, and it was at noon, the hottest point of the day-- so she must have needed it. Jesus was thirsty; he had made a long journey, and he was tired. His question broke through the layers of difference between them: "Give me a drink" and gave them a common longing to talk about a deeper longing: the longing, the thirst, for God.

I think about the isolation of the Samaritan woman. We did not read the whole chapter, but if you do you will see that she has had 5 husbands. Imagine the isolation she must have felt, for women did not have the right to divorce then-- it was the man-- 5 men-- who had initiated divorce with her. Perhaps one reason she was at the well, at the hottest time of the day was that her social status had diminished with each divorce, and so coming to do the hard work of fetching water at the hottest time of day was worth it to escape hostile stares. And yet it is to this woman that Jesus offers the gift of living water.

Is it possible that in this wilderness time we might discover living water in unlikely places? I am having amazing conversations with clergy colleagues as we support each other in these strange times. One such friend was working from home when she got a knock on the door. It was the Jehovah's Witnesses, there to preach the word to her, a Presbyterian pastor. Now you probably know that if we were to list the differences between Jehovah's Witnesses and Presbyterians, the list would be quite long, so upon realizing who was at the door my friend was trying to decide how she would respond to their testimonies. But upon opening the door, these Witnesses stood back 6 feet and said, "We're keeping a safe distance, but we wanted to offer a word of hope." Then they read Jeremiah 29:11, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." My friend said it was strangely comforting, and gave her a sense of the power of presence in the midst of fear, and how streams of mercy come from the most unexpected places.

I suspect we will find such streams of mercy coming from unexpected places during these troubled times. I already have. In a time when I fully expected our church members to be panicking about what they do not have, I have been pleasantly surprised at how much people want to share. I have had people text and email me saying they want to be helpful if any member is struggling to get food or supplies. Yesterday, I had two parishioners contact me and offer money through the Pastoral Services Fund for people in our church who are losing income because of this pandemic, and cannot make ends meet. I see them as rocks gushing with water in this wilderness desert we find ourselves in. In addition, I have been surprised that some of our members who have the heaviest burdens to bear, people who have every reason to be focused on self-care, reach out to me by email or text or phone calls, to say they are praying for

me, or to ask me how I am doing and offer encouragement and support. You show me how to be a better Christian.

It is true we are in a time when we need to isolate, not only to keep ourselves safe, but to keep the most vulnerable among us safe. And it will last days, and maybe weeks, and maybe more than that. We will feel like we are wandering in the desert, and we will feel like we are alone. But another unexpected source we can discover is how connected we actually can be. Most of us will have more time on our hands, if we are no longer commuting to work or going to school. We have time to tend to one another in ways we never take the chance to do in our busy lives. Call or videochat with your friends you never see. Check on your relatives multiple times. I will be working from home and homeschooling my child, so I won't have tons of free time, but I do plan to schedule videochats with my daughter's friends, each day reaching out to someone we have missed in our lives to read a book or present a project or to just be silly over lunch together. I have had a wonderful response from many of you texting and emailing me and chatting on facebook, and in some cases I feel like I am getting to know you even better than when I am in my office or in the sanctuary.

Even though the Hebrews looked back longingly at their years enslaved in Egypt, God would not let them into the Promised Land until they were completely changed, until the shackles of slavery had completely fallen off their ankles. Even though we are already missing the days we knew before we had ever heard of Coronaviruses, I am realizing how much what we had before was less than ideal. A prime example of that is the conundrum in New York City over whether to close the school. Every bit of scientific wisdom points towards closing the schools for the sake of public health. However, the biggest reason they cannot do that is that 114,000 children in New York City are homeless-- either living in shelters, or squeezing into rooms of homes that aren't their own, or literally on the streets. Without school, they have no safe place to be. Without school, they will not get a square meal each day. Without school, they have no reliable structure in their lives. It took a pandemic for us to realize that in one of the world's most powerful centers of wealth, a shameful poverty exists-- not that the poor are to be shamed, but that the existence of such poverty in the face of such wealth is shameful. The gaps in our health care, and lack of paid sick leave for workers, makes us realize that we weren't in the Promised Land before the Coronavirus hit. But maybe what we learn in this time of struggle will change us in ways that shape what we build when we reach the other side.

Yesterday I went biking and skating with my family in Overpeck Park. It was so beautiful out, and since people could be active there while still keeping a safe distance, I found myself forgetting what strange times we are living in. While we rolled by the pond, a bald eagle soared above us. For decades, Bald Eagles were an endangered species in this country, because of human disruption and also because of a common pesticide so harsh it poisoned the fish they ate and caused their eggs to have shells so thin their nests could never hatch. It took laws that were passed to protect this bird to bring it back to our country; in 1999 it was delisted from the Endangered Species List. I looked at this bird in Overpeck, flying high over a beautiful park that was built over what was once a dump. No, **I realized, we should not settle for what once**

was, when God is trying to present us with what could be. We will have to cross a wilderness to get there, and the biggest tragedy here is that not everyone who crosses the wilderness in this time will make it to the other side. That is why we will not grumble. We will count our blessings. We will attempt to rely on God. And we will share those sources of water the best we can. Our sacrifices will save as many people as possible, so that we can all be together on the other side of this. But no matter what, God will be with us, offering water, and tending to our thirst. Amen.