

3rd Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.12.23

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

John 4:5-42

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.” (995)

There would have been a lot of rocks around, and people would have been familiar with the practice of stoning someone. Moses wasn’t necessarily speaking in hyperbole here. When he told the Lord the people seemed ready to stone him, he wasn’t spinning wild fantasies or being dramatic.

It’s impossible to know, of course, how common such mob behavior would have been. It’s not the sort of thing that makes the history books. And, anyway, we’re dealing with pre-history here, meaning we might be as much in the realm of myth.

That said, the people *were* suffering, were amidst insufferable circumstances. They’d been enslaved in Egypt, less a nation of people with a common bloodline and more a class of people with a common station in life. Then Moses came along, returned to this land where he’d grown up and from which he had to flee—for having killed a slave master when he saw the master beat one of the enslaved. Having fled to Midian, now he was back, returned with a mission to free the enslaved, to restore them to their rightful place, full and free human beings, free now to serve the Lord.

But this is a harder lot in life than they might have imagined, a harder lot in life than any of us might like: freedom. Turns out, there’s some ease in being exploited where at least you know you’ll get some food to eat, some water to drink. It’s in the masters’ best interest to make sure their slaves have enough to keep them strong for work—if it’s only barely enough.

Out here, though, there were no such guarantees, compromised though such guarantees had been. There was hardly any food. There was hardly any water. And there was mounting anxiety, mounting resentment. Why had they followed Moses, anyway? Why had they trusted him?

The reason for that, of course, is that he had come to the people in the name of the Lord seeking justice—and not only that. He’d also come *with* the name of the Lord. YHWH. Previously

unknown, this name, this mysterious name. For to know someone's name is to have some control over them.

"Mom," Tobias once asked me long ago, "what's the most powerful word in the language?"

"I don't know," I answered, likely distracted, likely in the middle of a million things. He probably asked me while I was making him breakfast and getting him ready for the school day ahead, while getting myself ready for the workday ahead. I was probably looking for some permission slip I was supposed to have signed and looking for a clean pair of socks before I put my boots on—or his. "The most powerful word in the language," I probably said, a little annoyed that I had to think about anything big at this moment—this moment when I could barely even keep track of all the little things I had to remember.

"Liz," he said.

"What?" I asked, suddenly focused.

"That's it," he said. "That's the most powerful word, your own name."

YHWH. To know a god's name is to have some power over that God, some measure of control even.

Moreover, to know this god's name, the one who'd rightly come to be understood as the one true god: that's power!

But also, this mere utterance. This mere breath. Spoken to Moses from a bush that burned though was never consumed, this was the sound of being, and filled out by this sight of being, sustained being. Amazing! Being that doesn't consume or exploit. Being that doesn't cost any other being its being. Life fueled not by death but by life.

Amazing!

But also, very little to go on. This God in whose name Moses had come: it wasn't much, this God. It wasn't power as the world sees power. It wasn't overpower and trampling might. It was just being. The wondrous but also commonplace phenomenon of being.

Which is exactly what the people got in the wilderness. Not much to go on. No guarantees but presence of being, persistence of call.

So why again had they trusted him? Why had they trusted either of them?

"Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

Rocks would have been plentiful. Rocks would have been all around. They could be weaponized without any forethought, no planning at all. All it would take was one person who'd

had more than he could take, more than she could take. Lean down. Pick one up. When decorum is but the thinnest veneer, it only takes one move to crack it altogether. Then, all hell breaks loose.

Let's imagine Moses as someone who could handle himself.

Now let's imagine him as really afraid, suddenly afraid. "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

It could have happened. In certain places it still happens.

Funny, then, that the Lord would use these very things as the source of salvation. Just as suddenly, there it would be, salvation flowing from a rock. "Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." The thing he feared most, become the source for the thing he needed most.

The thing he feared most become the source for the thing he needed most.

We're heading to the cross. The season of Lent has us slowly moving, six weeks unto the cross. Six weeks to puzzle it through once again, that why was the cross a sign of salvation? That how could the cross be a means of salvation? How does gathering around the cross not amount to grim worship, a sick version of the God who is being, the God who is life? Worship this God who glories in tormented death? Worship this God who uses such things as the cross?

Except it's not God who used the cross; it's humankind, it's powers and principalities, these which rule the world. These are the ones who used the cross, commonly in fact; these are the ones who first devised the cross. The shape of a human used to kill a human, one at a time, slowly, torturously, and then to cast a shadow on the rest of humankind, a shadow of terror: "This could be you. So, watch yourself."

In Budapest, at *Andrassy ut* 60, there's a lovely house—big, stone—that fits in beautifully with the whole leafy boulevard. Over the course of its history from the mid-19th century, it went from aristocratic home to, in 1935, the home base the Communist Party when that came violently to rule Hungary. Upstairs, there were offices. In the basement, there were detention cells and torture chambers, though you'd never have guessed it. When, in 1944, the Nazis took over, they took over the building, of course. Got rid of the Soviets, cleared out their detention cells and torture chambers, and set up their own. Put them right back into use, just filled them with the people who'd once filled the offices upstairs.

The irony of this seems not to have dawned until much later.

Now a museum, there's an overhang off the roof which casts a shadow on the top front wall of the building and on the sidewalk below, carved into it the word in big block letters: "TERROR."

But, you know, the Romans did it long before the Soviets or the Nazis did, terror-casting, terror literally casting a shadow, cruciform.

Nazis, Soviets, Romans: humans. It's humans who use such things as the cross, while it's God who pays little heed to things such as the cross, God's son who lives irrespective of death, even humiliating death, *painful* death. It's God, through God's Son, who lives irrespective of the powers that deal in death and that would have him bow to their powers rather than rise to eternal life.

The cross reveals this—this essential difference between God and God's creation, God and God's creatures.

The cross indeed accomplishes this, so says our faith.

The thing to be most feared become the source of the thing most needed.

Is that just though a fancier way of saying, "That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger?" Because some things that don't kill you make you weaker, so that truism isn't all that true even when it's put in fancy terms.

These readings we heard this morning were the first readings we ever heard in the new world that Covid brought. These were the readings for the first Sunday we ever "Zoomed."

Considering this, as I did all week this week, I realized I feel like a different person now than I did when we approached these texts last—this frightened Moses for whom crisis meant also miraculous opportunity, this lonely woman whose outcast state (alone at the village well in the heat of the day) made for an openness to an encounter that could just as easily have been missed. I feel like a different person, though the point remains the same, a point which I preached then.

"Take this crisis," is what I said then about Covid coming upon us, "and use it to renew your love for what you love, to renew your commitment to what you care about."

See, I was thinking about how God works redemption in the hereafter and in the here-and-now. I was thinking about how, in these readings, we hear witness to a God who takes what's terrible and fills it also with possibility. The stones transformed from weapon to wellspring. The isolated woman, whose many marriages suggest something about how she's been used and abused though also incurring of suspicion and even blame (it must be her fault): in her isolation she becomes this gospel's first preacher, this gospel's first evangelist, going back to her village to tell

everyone what she has seen, which she'd not have seen if she hadn't been there then and all alone. I was thinking about how Covid might be such a crisis, might give us an opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with God who sustains, even when but barely, God who is present even when everything else has fallen away. Those apocalyptic moments when everything comes undone—everything but God who is being and in whom we most truly have our being.

“Take this crisis, then, and use it to renew your love for what you love, to renew your commitment to what you care about. Everything else, it seems, will have fallen away,” I said then, “—no concerts, no cruises, no club gatherings, no congregational gatherings maybe even. So, we will have time to reflect, time to think. Self-quarantine returns to us what might seem a most scarce resource: time. Take this time, then, and wonder at how God will transform this crisis to some strange opportunity for grace. Watch for it. It might happen. Work for it. It might come to you to strike, and it might give way to surprising grace.”

The thing is it was so very long. I anticipated a season: “This will be a strange Lent,” I said then, “where what we're forced to give up is something of each other. For a people that gathers as if to be one body, this will be different, strange, if not estranging. It might cause us to wonder, is the Lord among us or not?”

But then it went on.

And it went on.

And what might have been a pause became a break whose resetting, turns out, wasn't quite right, like a broken bone recast badly so even when healed it's not restored.

We're still in it.

We're always still in it.

Time doesn't stop and it never goes back. We'll never be who we were before Covid.

But redemption isn't really about the past; it's about the future. Redemption isn't about making what's terrible seem not to have happened: go back and erase it. It's about making what's terrible be not the sum total of what happened: move onward and fold it into the all in all, fill it out, fill it in.

Resurrection doesn't make it so Jesus didn't die, didn't *suffer* and die. It makes it so such things aren't the sum total of what he went through, aren't even all that important in all that he went through, all life before and after death.

This is a scandal. Let's be clear: this is a scandal because it can seem so glib: “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, so turn that frown upside down. Cheer up, cuz God's got this.”

And (time to come clean) I don't know how it can be anything but that. I really don't know how the reality of the resurrection can put life and its many terrors, not to mention its disappointments and struggles and more commonplace bumps and bruises, into such a perspective of joy and grandeur as to make it *not* glib.

And yet.

And yet, the long witness of the church insists on something far more miraculous than our own power of positive thinking.

The walk to the cross, which we are now on, might well have us hoping that every cloud really does have a silver lining, a fine thing to hope for. It also suggests a truth far less facile than all that, far deeper and more mysterious and far, far more good: that history will be redeemed, that suffering will be brought to ultimate joy, that the ways of the world are fine and all, but the ways of God, who is love and creative power and life, are the all in all and in the end will be all.

What's more, if we were to make this faith our life, then it might well be that this all, which awaits us at the end, is also now, if in part, maybe even large part.

The answer to the woman's question: "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Yes.

The answer to the people's question: "Is the Lord among us, yes or no?" Yes.

Yes.

Thanks be to God.