

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

LECTIONARY #28

READING I Exodus 17:3-7

A reading from the Book of Exodus

In **those** days, in their **thirst** for **water**,
the people **grumbled** against **Moses**,
saying, "**Why** did you ever make us leave **Egypt**?
Was it just to have us **die** here of thirst
with our **children** and our **livestock**?"
So **Moses** cried out to the **LORD**,
"What shall I **do** with this **people**?
A little more and they will **stone** me!"
The **LORD** answered Moses,
"Go over **there** in front of the **people**,
along with some of the **elders** of **Israel**,
holding in your **hand**, as you go,
the **staff** with which you **struck** the river.
I will be **standing** there in front of you on the **rock** in Horeb.
Strike the **rock**, and the **water** will flow **from** it
for the **people** to **drink**."
This Moses did, in the presence of the elders of Israel.
The place was called **Massah** and **Meribah**,
because the **Israelites** quarreled there
and **tested** the **LORD**, saying,
"Is the **LORD** in our **midst** or **not**?"

Exodus = EK-suh-duhs

A reading which is essentially a dialogue involving the Israelites, Moses, and the Lord. Its tone is dramatic; you need mainly emphasize when the different speakers begin to speak.

Moses is exasperated here.

The words of the Lord are meant to placate Moses' exasperation. But they are also instructions. Read them in this spirit.

Horeb = HOHR-eb

Massah = MAS-uh
Meribah = MAYR-ih-bah

The passage concludes with a naming of the place where this happened, but in the form of a question. The question does not shed the most generous light on the Israelites. Be sure to give emphasis to the word "not."

READING I The central image of this Sunday's lectionary readings is water. Depending on where we live, we might be tempted to take water for granted. But water is an essential element of life. Without water, plants dry up and forests burn. Without fresh water, animals and humans become sick and die. But when water is plentiful, all of creation flourishes. If we can say these things about water as an element of creation, how much more can we say about spiritual water, in all its forms, constantly flowing from God into our lives?

In today's first reading, we learn that the Israelites had escaped their slavery in Egypt and found themselves facing the harsh realities of life in the wilderness. These moments of challenge are described as tests that God imposed to see if their allegiance to God was strong and true. Two tests lead up to today's first reading. The first takes place at Marah in the wilderness of Shur. The people were thirsty, and there was water in that place, but they could not drink it, because it was too bitter. (*Marah* means "bitter" in Hebrew.) Moses cried out to God and God provided him with a stick,

which, when thrown into the water, turned the bitter water into fresh water (Exodus 15:22-27). The second test was similar. Now in the wilderness of Sin (or Zin) between Elim and Sinai, the people were hungry for food. Again, the people complained against Moses. Again, God did not rebuke the people. Instead, God sent manna from the heavens and quail for the people to eat (Exodus 16).

The third test, which is conveyed in today's first reading, also takes place in the wilderness of Sin at a place called Rephidim. Finding no water in this place,

For meditation and context:

TO KEEP IN MIND

On the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, these readings from Year A are connected with the celebration of the scrutinies—prayers for purification and strength—for the elect, those who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil.

A reading in which Paul provides a clear sense of how faith progresses from the proof of God's love evident in Christ's death. As is often true in Paul's letters, he gets right to the point. You should allow yourself to read this passage in the same spirit.

The tone shifts slightly here, especially at "disappoint." Despite the difficulty of what Christ accomplished, his success means victory, giving us hope.

The words in this line should have almost equal emphasis, especially "proves," "love," and "us."

the Israelites quarrel with Moses and grumble against him, but Moses challenges them in return, after making it clear in the preceding verse that their problem is not with him but with God: "Why do you put the LORD to the test?" Once again God does not rebuke the people but instead directs Moses to take the staff that he used in the execution of the ten plagues against the Egyptians and hit the rock in Horeb, making abundant water flow from the rock to quench the Israelites' thirst. The elders are there to witness God's work on behalf of the people.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 95:1–2, 6–7, 8–9 (8)

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD;
let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come into his presence
with thanksgiving;
let us joyfully sing psalms to him.

Come, let us bow down in worship;
let us kneel before the LORD who
made us.

For he is our God,
and we are the people he shepherds,
the flock he guides.

Oh, that today you would hear his voice:
"Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as in the day of Massah in the desert,
where your fathers tempted me;
they tested me though they had seen
my works."

READING II Romans 5:1–2, 5–8

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans

Brothers and sisters:

Since we have been **justified** by faith,
we have **peace** with God through our **Lord** Jesus Christ,
through whom we have gained **access** by faith
to this **grace** in which we **stand**,
and we **boast** in hope of the **glory** of God.

And **hope** does **not** disappoint,
because the **love** of God has been **poured out** into our hearts
through the **Holy Spirit** who has been **given** to us.

For **Christ**, while we were still **helpless**,
died at the appointed time for the **ungodly**.

Indeed, only with **difficulty** does one **die** for a just **person**,
though perhaps for a **good person** one might even find **courage**
to die.

But **God** **proves** his **love** for us
in that while we were **still sinners** **Christ** **died** for us.

The purpose of these three tests is now fully revealed in the closing sentence of this reading, "Is the LORD in our midst or not?" When we are angry with God and want to test whether God cares for us, can we also trust that God will not rebuke us and instead turn our hearts to witness God's benevolence on our behalf?

READING II Our second reading comes from Paul's Letter to the Romans. In the preceding chapters of this letter, Paul gives an intensive but somewhat abstract teaching on justification by

faith. Here he focuses on the gifts that justification brings to believers who trust in the power of God on their behalf.

But first, what does Paul mean when he talks about justification by faith? The words *justification* and *righteousness* are synonyms for the same Greek word, *dikaio-suné*. In the broadest sense, it means "the condition that is acceptable to God." But Paul gives this word a somewhat more precise meaning. When he refers to the righteousness of God, he means something like "God behaving as God is in God's self," and when Paul refers to human righteousness,

GOSPEL John 4:5–42

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

[Jesus came to a town of **Samaria** called Sychar,
near the **plot** of land that **Jacob** had given to his son **Joseph**.
Jacob's well was **there**.

Jesus, tired from his **journey**, sat down there at the **well**.
It was about **noon**.

A woman of **Samaria** came to draw **water**.

Jesus said to her,

"Give me a drink."

His disciples had gone into the **town** to buy **food**.

The Samaritan woman **said** to him,

**"How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman,
for a drink?"**

—For Jews use **nothing** in common with **Samaritans**.—

Jesus answered and said to her,

"If you knew the gift of God

and who 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 do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep,
where then can you get this living water?"**

Are you **greater** than our father **Jacob**,

who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself

with his children and his flocks?"

Jesus answered and said to her,

"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again;

but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst;

the water I shall give will become in him

a spring of water welling up to eternal life." >>

Samaria = suh-MAYR-ee-uh

Sychar = SI-kahr

A lengthy reading with a rich narrative progression. The focus of this reading is on the transformation of the Samaritan woman, who presents herself to Jesus as a skeptic but becomes a true believer by the end of the reading. Her conversion is presented in slight contrast to the work of Jesus' disciples, who themselves are skeptical of the Samaritan woman, mostly out of prejudice. Allow the rich social and spiritual realities of this passage to resonate in your proclamation.

At this point the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman begins. Distinguish between their words by slightly adjusting the pitch of your voice for each speaker.

Samaritan = suh-MAYR-uh-tuhn

The rhythm of this line is emphatic. Notice the stresses.

cistern = SIS-tern

These words of Jesus are the core of his exchange with the Samaritan woman.

he means something like "having been put right with God." Why do humans need to be put right with God? Paul says it is because of the nature of the first sin that affected and continues to affect all humanity, namely, the refusal to acknowledge God as God and to worship God accordingly (see Romans 1:18–23). But justification is not something that humans can do for themselves. Rather, it is God's free gift effected through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus to all who will receive it in trust. Such is the graciousness of God.

Thus, in today's second reading, Paul says that all of us who are justified by *faith* can enjoy peace (Greek, *eiréné* meaning, "tranquility, harmony, concord, security, or safety") with God as a free gift; we are acquitted of our sin and are no longer estranged but are now reconciled with God. This gift gives us assurance even in the face of difficulties, because these struggles develop our endurance, which in turn manifests as hope. And what is the source of this hope? It is not our doing, Paul says, but it is the outpouring of the superabundance of God's love through the Holy Spirit. It is

Christ who died for us; even when we did not deserve his sacrifice of love, he freely offered this gift so that we could be put in right relationship with God. How amazing is this gift!

GOSPEL

This reading from the Gospel of John has as its central character an unnamed woman of Samaria, who appears nowhere else in the Gospels. Yet, when we dig deeply into her story, you will find this woman to be utterly unforgettable because of her journey of faith.

With these words, the Samaritan woman's skepticism shifts into belief.

The woman **said** to him,

"Sir, **give** me this **water**, so that I may **not** 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 and said to him,

"I do not **have** a husband."

Jesus answered her,

"You are **right** in saying, 'I **do not** have a **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 can see that you are a **prophet**.

Our **ancestors worshiped** on this mountain;

but you people say that the place to worship is in **Jerusalem**."

Jesus said to her,

"**Believe** me, woman, the **hour** is coming

when you will **worship** the Father

neither on this **mountain** nor in **Jerusalem**.

You people **worship** what you do not **understand**;

we worship **what** we understand,

because **salvation** is from the **Jews**.

But the hour is coming, and is **now** here,

when **true worshipers** will worship the Father in **Spirit** and **truth**;

and indeed the Father **seeks** such people to **worship** him.

God is **Spirit**, and those who **worship** him

must **worship** in **Spirit** and **truth**."

The setting for this story is Jacob's well in the city of Sychar. In biblical tradition, wells are described as places of first encounter between men and their soon-to-be spouses. Abraham's servant found a wife, Rebekah, for Isaac at a well (Genesis 24), Jacob met Rachel at a well (Genesis 29:1-20), and Moses met his wife Zipporah at a well (Exodus 2:15-22). But the well in today's Gospel is the setting for a different type of meeting.

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is complicated. Both Jews and Samaritans tie their identity to

Jacob, the son of Isaac, the ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel. But Samaritans and Jews did not get along. In fact, they had been bitterly divided since after the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century bc. Things got so bad that the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim in the fourth century bc, rather than participate in the Temple activities in Jerusalem. Sadly, this animosity continues even today.

The narrator of this story identifies the time of this encounter as noon, the brightest point of the day. The Gospel of John is highly symbolic, and here we see the

author's use of dualism. He uses polar opposites like light and darkness, truth and falsehood, from above and from below to signal belief versus unbelief. In John's Gospel, belief is not a mental activity that results in assent to a set of doctrines; it is trusting in and allying oneself with Jesus and the Father. Thus, this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is not about clock-time but about coming into the full light of faith in Jesus Christ.

As this story unfolds, Jesus issues two commands to the woman: (1) "Give me a drink," and (2) "Go, call your husband and

And here, Jesus reveals himself as the messiah. Emphasize "he" and "speaking" to express the revelation.

The return of the disciples reinforces the "problem" of Jesus interacting with a Samaritan woman (something Jewish custom ordinarily forbade); it also marks a slight excursion, because the disciples want Jesus to eat while he has a lesson he wants to convey to them.

The woman said to him,
 "I **know** that the Messiah is **coming**, the one called the **Christ**;
 when he **comes**, he will tell us **everything**."

Jesus said to her,
 "I am **he**, the one **speaking** with you."]

At that moment his **disciples** returned,
 and were **amazed** that he was talking with a **woman**,
 but still no one said, "What are you looking for?"
 or "Why are you talking with her?"

The woman left her **water jar**
 and went into the **town** and said to the **people**,
 "Come see a **man** who told me **everything** I have **done**.
 Could he possibly **be** the **Christ**?"

They went out of the town and **came** to him.
 Meanwhile, the disciples urged him, "**Rabbi, eat**."

But he said to them,
 "I have **food** to eat of which you do not **know**."

So the disciples said to one another,
 "Could **someone** have brought him something to **eat**?"

Jesus said to them,
 "My **food** is to do the **will** of the one who **sent** me
 and to **finish** his **work**."

Do you not say, 'In **four** months the **harvest** will **be** here?'
 I tell you, look **up** and see the fields **ripe** for the **harvest**."

The **reaper** is already **receiving** payment
 and **gathering crops** for eternal **life**,
 so that the **sower** and **reaper** can rejoice **together**."

For **here** the saying is **verified** that 'One sows and
 another **reaps**.' >>

come back." After each command, Jesus and the Samaritan woman engage in dialog. Concerning the first command, the woman knows that Jews would not accept anything that had been in the possession of a Samaritan, and she is not subtle about pointing out their prejudice: "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" When Jesus offers to give her living water, she answers in retort: "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" But, of course, Jesus is greater than Jacob! She responds to his offer by saying, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty

or have to keep coming here to draw water." Notice how her tone and disposition toward Jesus is changing.

When Jesus delivers his second command, she responds that she has no husband, which Jesus confirms by detailing her history of having had five husbands and that the one she is currently with is not her husband. This bit of dialog has led some to conclude that this woman is a sinner, but the text does not support this view. Jesus does not condemn her or tell her to stop sinning, and later the townspeople immediately listen to her testimony about Jesus

and show no signs of her having been shunned by her neighbors. Was she the victim of many divorces? Was she widowed and married off again many times over? Or are the five husbands a symbol of her Samaritan beliefs that only the five books of the Torah are sacred scripture? Following this revelation of Jesus' knowledge, the woman's tone shifts again as she responds, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet."

This woman, who is not afraid to speak her mind, even when her culture forbade it, is also theologically literate. She takes advantage of this opportunity to ask

The conclusion returns us to the Samaritan woman; not only does she believe in Jesus, she is able to convert the other Samaritans because of her conviction. The words of the assembled Samaritans are spoken directly to the congregation's own faith.

I sent you to **reap** what you have not **worked** for;
others have done the **work**,
 and you are **sharing** the fruits of **their** work."

[Many of the **Samaritans** of that town began to **believe** in him]
 because of the **word** of the woman who **testified**,
 "He told me **everything** I have **done**."

[When the **Samaritans** came to him,
 they invited him to **stay** with them;
 and he **stayed** there two **days**.

Many more began to **believe** in him because of his **word**,
 and they **said** to the woman,
 "We no longer **believe** because of your **word**,
 for we have **heard** for **ourselves**,
 and we know that this is **truly** the savior of the **world**."]]

[Shorter: John 4:5–15, 19b–26, 39a, 40–42 (see brackets)]

about the right place to worship: the temple in Jerusalem or their temple on Mount Gerizim. When Jesus answers, saying that neither of these places of worship will matter in the end, because a time will come, "when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth," she concludes that Jesus is talking about the messianic age. Her response is in the form of a statement, "I know that *the Messiah* is coming," but listen carefully and you can hear the question in her heart, "Is he the one?" Jesus answers by saying, "*I am*." It is the same response that Moses received when

he asked God to reveal his name: "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14).

Almost immediately, the Samaritan woman leaves her water jar behind and goes into the village to tell the townspeople about her encounter with Jesus. When the villagers meet Jesus and hear his words, they proclaim him to be "*the savior of the world*." Pay attention to the progression of titles given to Jesus, as we follow the trajectory of this woman's faith journey. She is transformed from a water carrier to a proclaimer of the Good News and shares the message of that "spring of water welling

up to eternal life" Consider what this woman can teach us about our own journey of faith. C.C.