

3 Lent, Yr. A

March 15, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5: 1-11, John 4:5-42

As someone said yesterday, these are extraordinary times and indeed they are. We're faced with a situation that none of us has encountered before and there's a lot of uncertainty and confusion. I think that the key words here are precaution and prudence, as well as prayer. And the NOT key word is panic. I'd like to use the sermon to set some context for us and then at the close of the service, ask for your input into how we weather this situation and how we can best continue to be the body of Christ for one another.

So, first the context. Today's scriptures have to do with what it means to be human. It means, on the one hand, to be vulnerable but on the other, to be a beloved child of God. We get the vulnerable part quite easily, especially if we've lived a while. I remember having fallen on a steep ski run a number of years ago and sitting there, saw a kid about 6, fly by. And I remember thinking, he can only do that because he doesn't understand the consequences. Once he does, he may be a bit more cautious!

Because we're human, we have needs, real needs. We see Jesus' humanity in the reading from John: it's hot and he's thirsty and he has no way to get the water up from the well. The woman he meets has needs, too. But her

needs are more psychological and spiritual than physical. They both need help in different ways. Help because they are human. And as they reach across the barriers that separate them, reach across because of their needs, reconciliation and new understandings happen.

That same humanity is on display in the Exodus reading. You'll remember that it wasn't all that long ago that the Israelites had escaped from Pharaoh. They left Egypt rejoicing. God has rescued us! Moses is a great leader! Three days later, however, the murmuring begins. Or shall we say the questioning? They are at Marah and the water is no good; they're thirsty. Moses prays and God sweetens the water. This should shore up their faith for good, right? But then 72 days later in the wilderness around Sin, there's not enough food. And slavery in Egypt is now looking pretty good. At least there was enough to eat, they are thinking. And so the grumbling and the doubting surface again. God sends manna and quail this time. But now they're at Rephidim. No water again. Moses fears for his life at this point, but God saves the day once again. But then, at the end of the reading, Moses hits the nail on the head and names the essential problem: **the ISRAELITES TESTED THE LORD SAYING IS THE LORD WITH US OR NOT?**

And that is, to my mind, the essential question. Is God with us? Does God care? Can God be trusted?

It's the question asked by the vulnerable human. We saw it with Adam and Eve in the very beginning and I think it's always with us. In our day (and perhaps this has always been true) the problem around that question has been made worse by the preaching, in many churches of what's called the Prosperity Gospel. If I do the right stuff, I'll always be safe and happy and God will always answer my prayers in exactly the way I desire. Someone has said that that image of God is what could be called God as the great Coke machine in the sky. I put in my coins in the form of prayers and good works, and then when I want my reward, my Coke, and I hit the right button, God will fulfill my request. I'm not quite sure where that theology came from. It's certainly not biblical. You may remember Jesus saying that in this world there will be many tribulations. Things are going to go wrong, there is going to be suffering. The question for us is how we understand that suffering and how we respond.

And here we should look at Paul. SINCE WE ARE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, he says, we have peace with God. You'll remember that, for Paul, it's all about faith, about trust in God. It's not about earning our way into God's good graces – we're already there. So to be justified is to be made right, like the old idea of a justified margin on something you were typing. We're made RIGHT, we're made righteous. And you'll also remember that

righteousness is about being in the right relationship. And so we are, says Paul – we're related to God, through Christ, as God's beloved sons and daughters. We are beloved by the very Heart of all creation and nothing is more valuable than being a child of God. And once we KNOW that that's who we are, that that's our primary identity, we have PEACE, the peace, he later says, that surpasses all understanding. It's peace that is given not APART from suffering and tribulation, but in the very midst of it.

Let me insert a personal story here that I think it a perfect illustration. Perhaps I've told it before, but it bears retelling. It's about my sister and my dad. Dad loved to go ice-fishing and Annie loved to go with him. She tells about one trip when it was so terrifically cold that the ice was cracking and booming and, she said, she was horribly afraid. She was the master of silent crying and big tears were rolling down her cheeks. At some point Dad looked down and saw that. He stopped, knelt down beside her, took off his mittens, and wiped away the tears from her cheeks, asking her what was the matter. She told him how afraid she was. He simply said, "Don't you know that I would never let anything bad happen to you? You're safe with me." And, she said, he stood up, took her hand and they continued across the ice, but now everything was different.

I think that's exactly what Paul was trying to say. Later in this same letter to the Romans, Paul articulates our ultimate safety: CAN ANYTHING CUT US OFF FROM THE LOVE OF Christ – can hardships or distress or persecution or lack of food and clothing, or threats or violence...No, we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of him who loves us. For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nothing already in existence and nothing still to come, nor any power, nor the heights nor the depths, nor any created thing whatever, will be able to come between us and the love of God...

That's our ultimate assurance. And because we know that, we also know that God has placed us in the world to do the work of life in spite of fear and death and doubt. So the question for us is NOT "Is the Lord with us or not?" but what is it that I can do to decrease the suffering in the world and to increase the knowledge and love of God.

Let me close with a poem a friend sent me:

May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at risk.

May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips remember those that have no place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for quarantine at home remember those who have no home.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God. Amen.