

Third Sunday in Lent ~ March 19, 2017  
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez-Rivera  
Readings: Exodus 17:1–7, Psalm 95, Romans 5:1–11, John 4:5–42

In today's opening prayer, as is typical with most collects of the day, the primary point of the lessons is hinted. Today's collect didn't dilly dally about making that point clear: human creation is not only fallible, we also depend on God for guidance, sustenance, and deliverance. The prayer says, "Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves, ...keep our bodies and our souls...that we may be defended from all adversities". These words could have very well been said by Moses to God, or by any person of faith in any moment of time in this world. In today's Exodus story the Israelites were at an impasse with their liberator, Moses. The people were justifiably antsy because they had run out of water and were in the middle of nowhere – let's not forget that these were the same folks who followed Moses out of Egypt and wandered for forty years in the desert.

The bickered because Moses had delivered them from slavery in Egypt but they hadn't been "delivered" anywhere yet, and they also blamed God, whom Moses continuously tried steering them to for consolation. The scene in today's reading ends when Moses, directed by God, brought forth water from a stone, proving to the people once again that God had not abandoned them and that they would continue to be steered away from their calamities. That place where God manifested Godself and where the people were saved from thirst was given a new name: Meribah, which means quarreling, and Massah, which means testing. These names describe the Israelites who quarreled with Moses and tested God at the place of their salvation.

Today's gospel is a lengthy exchange between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. After talking with Jesus, she ran to town to tell the others about this man, Jesus. She, like Moses before her, became the Lord's voice, and many Samaritans subsequently came to believe in Jesus because of her invitation. That woman encountered Jesus, the living water, someone who interpreted reality rather well. Jesus understood the woman's suffering, how could he not, he is the Spirit of God, and so he knew what it was like to be her, a woman who had five husbands and when they met was living with another who wasn't her husband. I can't even begin to imagine what could possibly have been the reason for so much trauma and brokenness in her relationships, but Jesus was aware and he let her know how much he understood her reality. He offered her living water at the place of her salvation, the well, so that she could have some of his power to help herself, spiritual power to keep her body and soul defended from adversities. Jesus gave her a way to cope with her wilderness.

There are times when we, like our ancient ancestors in the wilderness, test God. When we find ourselves against a wall, desperate; we moan, groan, complain, and say to God something like, "hello, I'm here, and you are where?" We all acknowledge that it is precisely in these moments when we should rely on our faith and trust in God to deliver us from whatever

challenge we are up against; but we are typical human creation, who for the most part know that we do not have the power to change our circumstances, and so when the going gets tough the tough let loose on whoever or whatever is in front of us.

I invite you to reflect on your coping mechanism, what is it that you do when you have no power in yourself to help yourself? When you are between a rock and a hard place how do you assess your reality, your crisis, and who/what do you turn to? A person on his or her own may not be able to solve certain matters and so we seek support: a person, a group, a whole community that will respond. I've found myself being that responder and surely you have too. Recently within faith communities I have been approached by immigrants and citizens alike to help them understand the uncertainty surrounding immigrants in America. How can we help people through their wilderness of uncertainty and despair? Is God trying to use us as he did Moses, to help deliver his people from this wilderness? I can't say I know what to say to everyone, but with God's help and the collaboration of many others we are starting to mobilize resources to provide powers of attorney and family plans for the heads of households at risk of being detained or deported. The people feel no different than the Israelites in the desert or the woman at the well, disoriented, uncertain about the future, and distressed.

It was a witness of solidarity last Sunday when about five hundred people gathered at St. James to hear speakers from the six banned Muslim nations, and two of our own Latino members, reflect on their wilderness experiences. The fear of being detained or deported is their reality, and whether imagined or real, they ask God why such suffering to people who aren't criminals. I feel that those of us with voices can be modern-day Moses' because we can help transform someone's life and our own in the process, as we listen, pray, and guide. Sometimes we only see only our limitations but not our possibilities, that is where the power of God will be manifest. The Samaritan woman may have believed that, given the customs and traditions of her society, she could be no more than a woman wandering in the desert of her life. But Jesus led her to living water; he helped her understand that she was beloved, worthy, and that she had the dignity and power of the Spirit of God within her. Jesus reflected the love of God, Father and Mother of all; the God who doesn't discriminate, exclude or create unworthy anything's or anyone's.

I invite you to reflect on the words of today's collect, "Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves." Reflect on what living water means to you? Like the Samaritan woman, be bold, express yourself to God, ask for help in your wilderness, allow the Lord to use you to give water, or to be the voice of the Lord to another as they wander. We have no power in ourselves to help ourselves, we depend on the Almighty. Amen.