

Lent 3, March 15, 2020 (Jn 4:5-42; Ps 95; Ex 17:1-7; Ro 5:1-11)
In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic

Our readings during this Lenten season are about *relationships*, about *healing*, about *conversion*. In each of the gospel stories from John someone comes to Jesus seeking healing of some kind.

Last week we heard about Nicodemus—a Pharisee in hiding—who longed for the spirit of Jesus and learned that **God so loved the world, he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not *perish*, but may have everlasting life.**

The gospel assigned for today introduces the Samaritan woman at the well. A woman—wrong gender. A Samaritan—wrong race. A five-time widow, or divorcee—the ultimate loser. But Jesus sees only a soul that's been damaged by social mores, an outcast who's at the end of the water line, thirsty for acceptance and healing and *life*. And Jesus offers her the acceptance and respect due to all people, and the healing power of *living water* that he alone can provide.

In the reading from Exodus we heard how the people were ready to *stone* Moses because there was no water visible. Again, God provided water, right out of a rock, and the rebellious and thankless people were preserved.

The psalmist gives thanks: **Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. -- Let us come before him with thanksgiving . . . Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.**

Did you hear it again? **Let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.** Another reminder that God provides for us.

In the text from Romans Paul reminds us of other ways God has provided: **we have been justified**—made right with God—**through faith, and we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us access by faith to the grace we enjoy. . . . Christ died for us while we were still sinners. . . . We rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.**

God has given us faith, and that makes us right with God, meaning nothing stands between us and God. And God did that for us while we were still sinners! He didn't wait for us to repent and confess our sins and promise to do better. **Christ died for us *while we were still sinners!***

Paul writes, **We rejoice in our *sufferings*, because we know that suffering produces endurance; endurance produces character; and character produces hope; and we can trust this hope, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.**

Hope does not disappoint us, writes Paul. Hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy spirit, whom he has given us.

Two weeks ago the appointed readings were about *wilderness* experiences. Moses was leading the people in the wilderness—for 40 years—and they were already angry with him then. Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, and there he was tempted for 40 days by the devil.

Where was God in all this? Where was God in the midst of those times in the wilderness? God was where he always is: **with us**. That's what the name *Emmanu-el* means: *God with us*.

From the very beginning of creation, God has always provided for the human beings he created with his own hands out of the dust of the earth. God blew his own holy breath into the nostrils of the man, and the man lived. God provided a perfect paradise filled with all good things, where the man and his woman lived.

When his first children sinned, God provided a way for them *not* to have to live forever with shame and guilt: God banished them from the Garden, not as *punishment*, but as *deliverance* from eternal awareness of their sin. Once banished from Eden, God's children lost the possibility of eternal life weighed down by sin and guilt.

But God continued to cherish his children. Desiring to *love them into wholeness*, in the fulness of time **God gave his only Son, so that everyone who *believes* in him may have eternal life**. Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but in order that the whole world might be *saved* through him.

Today Christians throughout this country are asking themselves, *What's going on? Where is God in all this?* We know the coronavirus is devastating, deadly in some cases. We don't want to catch it—but it seems the only way to avoid that possibility is to totally isolate ourselves. People can *have* and *transmit* the virus for 14 days before they develop symptoms—it's possible we've all been infected and just don't know it yet.

In the last three days I received two emails from Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, providing guidelines for living with the threat of the coronavirus. She has asked us to consider, “How can we best love our neighbors and ourselves in this situation?” With the support of our Council, I would like to implement these practices for Sunday worship:

- We will “fast” from Holy Communion for the remainder of Lent, celebrating the Lord’s Supper on Maundy Thursday and Easter if things seem more stable.
- We won’t pass the offering plates. Please leave your offerings in the plates or baskets at one of the exits from the sanctuary.
- We will share the peace with voices, waves, or the “peace sign.”
- Beginning next Sunday (at St. John) we’ll print the hymns in the bulletin so we don’t have to handle the hymnal; and I ask that you not follow the readings in your pew Bible.
- Please don’t come to worship if you feel ill in any way!
- Cough and sneeze into your elbow; if you use a tissue or handkerchief, *please* wash your hands thoroughly.
- If you have access to a small hand sanitizer, carry it with you; we have sanitizers on each window sill in both congregations.

Together we are the body of Christ, the communion of saints, the fellowship of believers. When schools and work environments are shut down, that’s when we most have need of each other. As long as I’m not ill, I will be here for worship on Sundays until further notice. If we *do* cancel a service, we’ll let you know on WAOW under the “school closings” section.

One of the prayers in the Lutheran Funeral Service, celebrated yesterday for Harvey Willhite, seems appropriate:

Almighty God, give courage and faith to all who mourn, and a sure and certain hope in your loving care, so that casting all their sorrow on you, they may have strength for the days ahead. Help us, in the midst of things we cannot understand, to believe and trust in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting.

Whether you're mourning a death, temporary loss of a job, schooling or fellowship event, or canceled plans for a vacation, remember that God has always provided for his chosen people and will always be there—*here!*—for us.

God loves you and so do I! Amen.