

Lent 3A
March 15, 2020
Exodus 17:1-7

NEGOTIATING THE WILDERNESS TOGETHER

Pastor Erik here, sending grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Creator, from Jesus the incarnate one in our midst, and from the Holy Spirit, who holds us in community even when we're unable to be physically together in one place.

I hope that when this message reaches your ears, it finds you and your household healthy and coping as best you can during this stressful time we're living through!

Each day brings new measures on the part of government and health officials aimed at lessening the impact and spread of the coronavirus. And each day brings new challenges to each one of our lives as we grapple with shifting realities at work, home, and church.

In keeping with State mandates, worship services and gatherings at Peace have been cancelled for the time being.

How will we continue to be the Body of Christ for each other during this extraordinary time?
How will we negotiate this new wilderness experience together?
These questions are at forefront of my mind as your pastor.

Over the past week I've participated in several VIRTUAL MEETINGS with Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee and other pastoral leaders around the synod where strategies for ministry in our new context have been shared.

This new reality we're living through—and through is the operative word here, because we know this cycle won't continue forever—is birthing all sorts of creative ideas for how we can maintain and even deepen our connections with one another during this time.

One thing you can count on from me is weekly communications shared via email and website. These messages will all be posted and available on the Peace website going forward.

Our website address is: www.peacelutheranseattle.org. You can save it on your browser's "favorites" toolbar. Look for a LINK under the SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS section of our homepage.

There is also a link on our congregation's FACEBOOK PAGE: [People of Peace Lutheran Seattle](#). We hope to have additional capabilities in coming days and weeks.

I want you to know that I am also committed to making phone contact with every Peace household. I've been working my way through the Peace directory, checking in to learn how you are doing, what challenges you face, and what you might have to offer to others during this time.

If you haven't yet received a call, or heard my voice on your voicemail, know that that time is coming!

Our church council will be meeting this Tuesday, and you can expect further communication coming out of that meeting. So stay tuned.

I'd like to pivot now and share a reflection with you through the LENS that the Scriptures and our faith tradition provide. So, dearly beloved, here's my homily for today.

If you'd like to read the Scripture text with me, you can pause now to locate a bible before I begin.

Our first reading for Sunday, March 15th, and the subject of my homily, comes from Exodus, the 17th chapter, beginning at the first verse (NRSV):

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?"

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Friends, what an apt text we have before us today in this story of God's people midway through their Wilderness experience.

- Their formation as a people emerging from slavery proceeds, the text tells us, "by stages" as step by step they move further away from the trauma that characterized their captivity under Pharaoh's Empire and closer to the new freedoms and responsibilities that awaits them in the Promised Land.

This episode is one in a string of incidences in which God's people come face to face with issues of survival, and find themselves wondering if Moses—and ultimately the LORD—can be trusted.

The questions that bubble up for them are real and immediate:

- How can we know if God is with us, in our midst?
- What evidence can help us discern the presence and providence of God?
- How do we respond when we feel abandoned?

The kinds of questions they gave voice to are not unsimilar to ones we're asking ourselves these days.

Looking back at Israel's wilderness experience to this point, we can see that when they have what they need they believe God is with them.

But when hunger, thirst, or other afflictions confront them, old fears come to the surface, causing them to wonder whether God has abandoned them.

It is hard to leave behind oppression that has been internalized.

In times of high anxiety, if we could see our families and communities from a BALCONY or GOD'S EYE point of view we might see some UNHELPFUL PATTERNS emerge—patterns that invite feelings of distrust, anger, resentment, and finger pointing.

This is often what happens when fears and traumas get triggered.

When so much is at stake and anxiety is on the rise, these unhealthy reactions and patterns can take over, throwing us further out of balance.

Israel's trek through the wilderness was a daily struggle for survival—and it went on for 40 long years! Imagine! At this point we've been dealing with the COVID-19 crisis for weeks, but the fears and anxieties emerging for us are no less real.

For Israel, the absence of water (perhaps for us it's sanitizer) quickly becomes an existential crisis!

As a result, the people quarrel with Moses and he in turn interprets their quarrel as a testing of God.

Now, it's important to remember the crises they've already lived through prior to the current one.

At a place called Marah, only days after crossing the Red Sea, the people were thirsty and the LORD showed Moses how to turn bitter water into drinkable water.

And later, when they ran out of food, God sent MANNA and QUAIL to provide for their daily needs.

But in today's story, their growing thirst triggers a post-traumatic response, and all the lessons they've learned about trusting in God's presence and providence take a back seat to the immediacy of the moment.

**Did you notice? Moses is anything BUT the non-anxious leader in this scenario!
He hovers on the edge of full panic mode!**

But look at how God handles things.

Instead of responding with impatience or punishment, the LORD gives clear direction to Moses about how to calm the people's fears.

“Go on ahead of the people,” God says, “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.”

God provides a very public sign for the people to hold onto and contemplate.

With a group of newly chosen elders beside him, Moses parades before the people, and using the same staff he'd used in Egypt to render the Nile undrinkable, he summons drinkable water from the rock.

Victor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, said that while we cannot choose what circumstances we encounter in this life, we have the power to choose how we will respond to those circumstances.

In his seminal book, Man's Search for Meaning, he wrote:

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves. Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.¹

Sisters and brothers, during this coronavirus time, as we come face to face with our vulnerability, and grapple with increasing limitations, we still have the capacity to choose how we will respond.

As followers of Christ our calling is constant: loving God and neighbor. As the days unfold, I hope each of us will discover new and simple ways we can make this happen within the places where we live.

In this time when social distancing is being mandated and isolation threatens to imprison us in our own little bubbles, we can choose new ways, or renewed ways, of being in community with one another.

By taking on the ultimate form of vulnerability on the cross, Jesus showed us that vulnerability is not a synonym for weakness, but rather a Godly form of strength.

Of one thing we can be confident: God companions us now, as he companioned the Hebrew children in their wilderness, and will use us in this uncertain time as we pray, encourage one another, and care for the needs of the most vulnerable among us.

Let us pray...

Ever gracious God, we look with you at the families, communities, and countries around the world who are suffering greatly from the consequences of the corona virus and its effects both on bodily health and economic well-being. As the circle of impact widens and the crisis deepens, give us the assurance that you are with us, that you hear our cries, you know our vulnerabilities, and that in Jesus, you walk beside us every step of this journey.

Be with all the frontline responders and health professionals who put themselves in harm's way every day in order to provide care and to seek solutions. Give wisdom and insight to doctors, researchers, and government leaders as they seek a path toward the containment and effective treatment of COVID-19.

¹ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Lord, Christ, we look with you at all those within our circle here who are in need of comfort and healing, and especially today we lift up the Stenberg and Flint families in the wake of Jan Stenberg's sudden death last week. In this time when we cannot communicate in person our love for them and the sorrow we share at the loss of Jan, may our words of consolation and your resurrection hope sustain them.

Finally, keep our community safe and well while we are absent from each other, and strengthen our bonds through prayer, encouragement, and creative engagement.
Trusting in your love for us and for all, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Today is Sunday, March 15th and I will be at Peace from 9:00am to Noon.

If you would like to talk or pray together, you can reach me at the church #206-935-1962.

Know that I'm available at any time through my mobile number.

The peace of the Lord be with you always.