

Your Very Best Life: Third Sunday in Lent **"Tempted, Tried, and Justified"**

March 14/15, 2020

Digging Deeper

Your Very Best Life: "Tempted, Tried, and Justified"

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Background Notes

Third Sunday in Lent (March 14/15, 2020)

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

Introduction

Let's review our key text for this series:

But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32).

The promise of Lent is that what happened with Jesus is also what he wants to happen to us. He lifts us up so that we might have "The Very Best Life" as he draws us deeper into relationship with himself.

From the wilderness of Sinai to the well of Samaria, our readings this week take us on a Lenten journey punctuated with hardships, complaints, thirsts for water, calls to worship, and invitations to eternal life. With roots in the great Israelite story after the Exodus, our texts this week highlight the suffering of God's people, read in light of Jesus on his way to the cross where he faced the supreme test. The journey of Jesus is the journey of Israel, retraced and reformed. The man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, Jesus shared in the common condition of the human race in its struggles to find meaning and purpose within a damaged world. Lent calls the church, the people of God, to share in this journey, taking pages from the old stories to shed light on their new situation in our own times. We are called upon to endure the suffering with Jesus while also sharing the good news with others who, like ourselves, hunger and thirst for a better life, "Your Very Best Life."

"Quarrelling about food; Tested by God" — Old Testament: Reading 1

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?" (Exodus 17:1-7).

What were the expectations of this people called Israel after liberation from slavery in Egypt? Did they imagine a quick jump to the better life made possible by *freedom*? How did they think of freedom? Was freedom the complete absence of trouble, the opportunity to do *now* what they were denied by Pharaoh *then*? As it turned out, freedom could never be the mere removal of all constraint on choice, on desire, on life. And yet, both then and now, people generally see freedom in those terms. "Let us do what we want, when we want, where we want, and how we want." Of course such freedom is an illusion because human beings must live together with conflicting wants.

Slavery erased dignity, brought shame, and lacked freedom. And yet Pharaoh of necessity needed to feed his work force, providing water, shelter, and protection, not because he loved the slaves, but because he needed their labor. When Israel's God sent the plagues on Egypt, and then under Moses brought them to freedom, life in the wilderness did not bring automatic provision. They needed to trust the God of freedom for supplied resources of food and drink if freedom had been given for a purpose. When the rigors of desert life did not

yield up those resources, they complained to Moses whose prayer to God, like the complaints of the people, questioned what God was doing: “What shall I do with this people?” Moses was not Pharaoh with fat storehouses of food and plenty of water for the slaves. Both Israel and Moses were tested by the uncertainty of freedom after slavery; they were tested with expected questions about basic necessities. Who wouldn’t be?

“Go ahead of the people...” God says. “Take the staff you used in Egypt to part the waters; take the elders of Israel. Find the rock of Horeb and striking it bring forth water.” The text teaches us that the God of Egypt is also the God of the wilderness. “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock.” Wherever the hurting, starving, thirsting, fearful people of God go, He is still standing in front of them on the rock. To pass the test His people need to believe He is with them. Israel knows the real question to ask: “Is the Lord among us or not?” Where are you, O God of promised freedom? Where are you when our circumstances bring suffering? “I am here, in front of you and among you,” he says. And so the water flows and the food appears. There is no guarantee that trouble will not return. But God returns, again and again, amid complaint and fear because Israel is His people whom he loves, and so are we.

Few have known the thirst of God’s absence more profoundly than Mother Teresa, whose private writings tell of a long, terrible sense of abandonment that bordered on a living hell. Even in such darkness, however, that tiny, wizened woman of God clung to the belief that she bore in her body and soul “the love of an infinite thirsty God,” and that her labors on behalf of Calcutta’s hopeless ones helped to satiate the burning thirst of Jesus on the cross.¹

Your very best life spends time in the wilderness where the testing of human needs and desires shapes the character of our souls. The Lenten Jesus knows the testing more than we do, and so we look to him as Savior and Lord.

“Wayward in Heart; United in Worship” — The Response: Reading 2

1 Come, let us sing to the Lord; * let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.	and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. *
2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving * and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.	Oh, that today you would hearken to his voice!
3 For the Lord is a great God, * and a great King above all gods.	8 Harden not your hearts, as your forebears did in the wilderness, * at Meribah, and on that day at Massah, when they tempted me.
4 In his hand are the caverns of the earth, * and the heights of the hills are his also.	9 They put me to the test, * though they had seen my works.
5 The sea is his, for he made it, * and his hands have molded the dry land.	10 Forty years long I detested that generation and said, * "This people are wayward in their hearts; they do not know my ways."
6 Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee, * and kneel before the Lord our Maker.	11 So I swore in my wrath, * "They shall not enter into my rest." (Psalm 95)
7 For he is our God,	

“Come, let us sing to the Lord” hardly sounds like the poetry of a suffering people, and yet the psalm reading this week begins with reminders that no matter where we are, “Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving...” As for Israel, so for the poet of Psalm 95, that the presence of the Lord among us makes all the difference in the world. Our suffering He shares, and also our hunger and thirst. He is “a great God, great King above all gods” with hands holding together the caverns and the hills, the seas and dry land, for He is our Maker, our God, we are His people, the sheep He tends with His hand.

As with many psalms, the first stanzas are altogether a declaration of trust anchored in the reliable character of “the Rock of our salvation.” Remember what he told Moses: “I’ll be standing on the rock.” Our prayers, like this psalm, ought to begin with affirmations of faith in the God who hears them. We wouldn’t be praying, singing, thanking, or shouting with psalms if He were not that kind of God. Our wilderness experiences would tell us otherwise: that we are abandoned, *forsaken*, without adequate resources for life. Lent is an especially good season in the life of the church to be reminded of the wilderness where Israel “hardened their hearts” and tempted God. That is why things are often “given up” in Lent, to remind us about the wilderness, not only of our own lives but also of those less fortunate. Israel probably wasn’t thinking about other famished and thirsty

¹ Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk, MC (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 154– 57.

nations around them when they complained about their own deprivations. We should. However, token actions in Lent must be matched by concrete initiatives for the wilderness of others through food pantries, hot meals, transportation for senior medical appointments, foster care, judicial advocacy, and peacemaking.

The psalm ends with a transcription of Israel in the wilderness, reminding the jubilant singers that the real problem with our response to hardship and suffering is “waywardness in our hearts.” Who do we love? What do we desire? Where do we set our affections? “They do not know my ways” reminds us that only when hearts follow the leading of the Lord can we meet the wilderness head on with trust and confidence, song and joy “to the Rock of our Salvation.” Jesus lifts us up in gratitude and praise for the very best life he sets before us.

“Justified by Faith; Reconciled by Love” — The Epistle: Reading 3

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person-- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Romans 5:1-11).

“Justified” is Paul’s term for *making right what has been wrong, misaligned, disordered*, and out of relationship. He borrows his language from the Jewish law court and also from the Roman legal process. In those contexts the judge considers the issues of the two sides: considering what has been lost, who has been harmed, and how the grievances presented can be made right. Justice, so understood, puts the burden on the judge to do the right thing in both rulings for restitution and also restoration. The common word in jurisprudence is to “make litigants *whole*.” The Christian gospel, Paul tells us, is about both retributive and restorative justice, and Jesus is the basis for declaring persons righteous — in the right through sins forgiven and lives made whole. His death is the provision, the just basis, for all such acts of righteous justice. He calls the condition of restored persons one of “peace” — the Hebrew *shalom* — which is a state of well-being, flourishing, and right relationship between God and humanity. Our “standing” in the court of God’s restorative justice is *grace* which deals with past and present wrongs, but then also points persons to the future where there is “hope of sharing the glory of God” and the image of God at last restored and persons made whole.

None of this happens without suffering” foremost, the suffering of God’s Son for us who atones for sin, offers forgiveness, and sets the captives free. However, there is also the participation of Christ’s followers in the sufferings of Jesus on behalf of his coming kingdom. Grace is costly and not cheap, for although it is free grace without merit on our part, yet grace carries responsibility for obedience out of gratitude to God. Suffering understood in this way is not gratuitous pain, but the instrument for change. Paul identifies the productive nature of suffering in a series of Christian virtues: endurance, character, hope, and love — all of which are the fruit of “the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (compare Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 13)

In the last paragraph of this text, Paul paints a vivid and moving portrait of the “Christ who died for the ungodly.” Death for the benefit of others is a common experience: when parent sacrifices life for a child; when children died to save their parents; when citizens give their lives for their countrymen in war; when friend dies for friend. Paul remarks that dying for “a good person” is honored as an act of courage by family, community, or nation. To die for a good person is valorous to be sure, and we view this sacrifice as “good.” The wonder of Jesus’ death is that he sacrificed for “sinners” who least deserved his death on their behalf. Paul wants to underscore that such a death for sinners elevates “God’s love for us” — proves that love as genuine — precisely

because *we were sinners* for whom God gave his Son and Jesus gave his life. On the basis of that kind of love, God delivers us from the guilty verdict of the law court which Paul calls “God’s wrath.”

Beyond the vindication of God, the acquitted sinner also receives restorative justice, here described by the word “reconciliation,” a term describing restored relationship with God and then acceptance in the community of Jesus. Or, in other terms, “we will be saved by his life,” by the power of Jesus’ resurrection which follows his sacrifice on the cross for us.

The Greek verb “reconcile” is *katallassō* and its related noun form is “reconciliation” is *katalagē*. The meaning of these terms involves reestablishing proper friendly interpersonal relations after these have been disrupted or broken. The componential features of this series of meanings involve (1) disruption of friendly relations because of (2) presumed or real provocation, (3) overt behavior designed to remove hostility, and (4) restoration of original friendly relations - “to reconcile, to make things right with one another”.

Paul underscores the reliability of the justified life (and the reconciliation made possible through it) by using the phrase “much more surely.” God declares the verdict of our vindication, and then He refuses any attempt to overturn it on appeal! The state of reconciliation is a “sure” condition of the sinner forgiven by God. Other people share in reconciliation with us. The church of Jesus Christ is the community of those other people, and into this body of other believers the newly justified sinner finds her new home, her new family and is “accepted into the beloved one.” The old divides of culture, ethnicity, gender, economics, and class are set aside by God’s act of reconciliation. Reconciliation of persons with God and others is our settled condition that makes possible “Your Very Best Life.”

“Divided by History; Reconciled by Jesus” — The Gospel: Reading 4

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that 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 have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never 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 him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no 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 see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving

wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." (John 4:5-42).

The marks of the justified, reconciled and whole life are evident in the Gospel reading for this week. The setting is a well in Sychar, a town within the providence of Samaria. To the first readers of John's gospel who knew the history of Israel, this setting was provocative. Samaria and Samaritans belonged to an estranged branch of Israel's ancient family, having roots in the separation of northern and southern kingdoms in 931 BCE. The tree of God's chosen people fractured into two nations: Israel and Judah, each going their separate ways, practicing differing forms of Hebrew faith, ruled by separate dynasties of kings, and destined to different deadly endings. History records how eventually Judah and the remnants of northern Israel resettled their lands *without reconciliation*. By the time of Jesus, a wall of separation remained firmly in place, solidified by the Roman occupation and division into provinces.

Jews considered Samaritans to be illegitimate Jews, akin to the foreign Gentiles: worshipping a different version of God in different temples with alien forms of sacrifice offered on different mountains, guided by an alternate copy of the Law code. In the eyes of Jews, Samaritans were unclean, unworthy, unchosen, and unapproachable. "Jews had no dealings with Samaritans," John tells us.

Into this setting enters Jesus and his disciples. Eventually, after the disciples left on a food errand, a woman from the town comes to the well to draw water. Jesus opens the conversation with the woman, a strange and uncharacteristic gesture for a Jewish man with a Samaritan woman at a public well in the middle of the day. Jewish Kosher laws were vigorously enforced, and so when Jesus asks for a drink from the woman, she shrinks back in astonishment and in protest. Quickly the conversation turns from ordinary water to living water, away from the one thing that divided the two of them to the one thing that held hope for reconciling them. In effect Jesus ignores the rules and offers the remedy for their ancient animosities. He moves beyond the past of enemies to the promise of friends.

After a few interjections and rejoinders, Jesus lays out his agenda, acknowledging their shared past as descendents of Jacob ("our father"). Jesus uses the imagery of well-water to instruct the woman, not in what divides them, but what has and can unite them again. All controversies about well-water, Jews, Samaritans, and the inadequacy of their present relationship which those things represented — all divisive facts of history between them — pale by comparison to the new future Jesus shows to the woman. "Living water" is flowing water from underground springs in contrast to cistern water from rain, collected and stagnated in the well beneath. Jesus draws the parallel to the spiritual water he offers to the woman: "Ask and I will gift you with better water, with the best water, that bubbles up like an artisan well with the promise of eternal life." He offers her water for *the very best life*.

The Samaritan woman reads between the lines, and readers of our text should not suppose she lost sight of Jesus' meaning. Little did she know, however, how much Jesus knew about her, and how the "water and well" of her failed life kept sending back to this well. Perhaps she let down her guard when she spoke about her return to the well for water that never fully satisfied her thirst. The next paragraph pulls back the curtain on her failed life in relationship with no less than six men with whom she had intimate relationship inside and outside marriage. Water from the well became a symbol of romance in the life of the woman, the place where she likely made her rendezvous for a better relationship than the one before. Jesus brings their conversation back to the heart of the matter: "You are what you worship" in the same way "You are what you love." Jews and Samaritans debated the place of worship and how to worship God, but where had it gotten them? Did their

respective worships bring them closer together or farther apart? There is a better way, Jesus tells her: *the very best way*.

“The hour is coming” is a promise about a better future, one where God’s Messiah will lead His people beyond mountains and temples to the Spirit whose worship brings both of them closer to the true experience of God. To the woman’s surprise, Jesus reveals that he is that Messiah. Hope for reconciliation and for God to justify Jew and Samaritan alike has finally arrived, and he is standing on Samaritan soil, talking with a Samaritan woman, and offering the gift of living water to make it happen.

John’s narrative doesn’t end here. The disciples return, are displeased with what they see, and Jesus now must deal with *them*! They question the propriety: “Why are you speaking with her?” That sentence magnifies the divide between Samaritans and Jews, uncovering the state of enmity between them, and the refusal for even the followers of Jesus to share in the promise of reconciliation. The woman, sensing the tension in the air, returns to the city. Unmoved by the disappearance of the woman, the disciples turn toward the mundane matter of having lunch: “Rabbi, eat something.” Their well-intentioned deference toward Rabbi Jesus shapes their response, as they try to fix the momentary disorientation occasioned by Jesus and the woman together. But Jesus has other ideas.

The disciples are concerned about food for the Rabbi, *kosher* food for the Rabbi, offered to him in the very un-kosher setting of the Sychar well of Samaria. Jesus turns the tense incident into a teaching moment. Yes, food matters, but not the ordinary kind. He shifts their attention to the fields ripe for harvest, fields laden with grain soon to become bread. Harvests need workers if people are to have bread. Sowers need harvesters or their work is for naught. However, Jesus is speaking metaphorically to his disciples; not about literal fields of grain, sowers, and harvesters, but about the harvest of *souls*, of people like the woman at the well.

There is a flashback in John’s story, for the woman returns to her town, has conversation with the townspeople, reveals the identity of Jesus, and persuades them to meet Jesus. “They left the city and were on their way to him.” Therefore, the ripened harvest fields turn out to be the residents of the Samaritan town responding to the testimony of the woman at the well. Jesus had sown the seed in the heart of the woman, and the disciples were now called to help with the harvest. As “they lift up their eyes to the fields,” the disciples no doubt see a crowd of Samaritans coming their way, like ripened grain, waving in the breeze of the Spirit! If seeing one Samaritan woman with Jesus at the well provoked them, imagine their horror when the whole town was marching in their direction! And so, Jesus invites his disciples to the harvest enterprise of reaping the Samaritan harvest!

The work of reconciliation begins with breaking down the walls and bringing together people who are sworn enemies. John highlights that process in his closing paragraph:

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Jew and Samaritans lodging together for two days probably violated every rule in the kosher handbook! But we cannot stand in the way of the power of the word sown in sinners’ hearts if sinners are going to be justified and reconciled by God. Open table fellowship with Samaritans is the first step. Conversation between enemies is the happy result. Faith in Jesus is the best possible outcome. We are left with the dramatic testimony of the Samaritan converts: “We know that this is truly the Savior of the world!” Notice that they say “Savior of the world”; not “Savior of the Jews” or “Savior of the Samaritans,” but “Savior of *the world*.”

The Gospel reading agrees with the teaching of Paul and the tradition of Israel’s great promises, in the wilderness and at worship. God is the Lord of the world who through Jesus His Son opens the door for enemies to become friends, justifying sinners regardless of affiliation, and then through His love reconciling them together in one body, one community, and one God through the Spirit of Jesus.

Conclusion

Tempted, tried, and justified. Lent proclaims the good word of what the very best life looks like when practiced by community of Israel and the church. In the wilderness, the tested God takes His stand:

"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."

The gospel declares that Jesus is the rock, struck by the suffering of the cross, not on Horeb but on Calvary. His wounded side pours forth, not only water, but water and blood, so that a divided humanity might be justified into a new people of God. Where there was once enmity, there is now friendship. Where thirst for water failed to satisfy the parched soul, there is now living water for eternal life. Where doubt in the wilderness of despair once reigned, there is now faith in the God who keeps His Word to tempted and tried pilgrims on their way to the promised land. Lent proclaims the verdict of the King of heaven: you are justified and made whole, the very best gift for *your very best life*.

One hymn writer captured this meaning in poetry, the cry of the human heart filled with despair about the journey (W.B. Stevens, 1937):

*Tempted and tried we're oft made to wonder
Why it should be thus all the day long
While there are others living about us
Never molested though in the wrong*

*When death has come and taken our loved ones
It leaves our home so lonely and drear
And then do we wonder why others prosper
Living so wicked year after year*

*When we see Jesus coming in glory
When he comes down from his home in the sky
Then we shall meet him in that bright mansion
We'll understand it all by and by*

*Farther along we'll know all about it
Farther along we'll understand why
Cheer up my brother live in the sunshine
We'll understand it all by and by*

The Lenten season invited us to this journey: through texts that shed led on the life known so far and with Jesus on his way to the cross. From lonely wilderness to living water, we walk together the *Via Delarosa*, the road of suffering with Jesus. What Israel learned in the wilderness, tempted and tried; what the poet remembered in lyrics of praise and instruction; what Paul taught about sin, grace, and the justified life; what Jesus proclaimed to the woman at the well and to his disciples — these are the biblical markers along the journey of Lent. In the wilderness there is God standing on the rock. In the poetry there is God worthy of praise. In the teaching there is reconciled life made whole. In the example of Jesus there is living water for all to drink. The journey brings us to “Your Very Best Life.”

But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32).

To God Be the Glory! Amen!