
CREATION TO NEW CREATION

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR A

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“PILGRIMAGE: FROM SLAVE NATION TO THE WORLD.” THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

Exodus 17.1–7; Psalm 95; Romans 5.1–11; John 4.5–42.

Exodus 17.1–7

Water from the Rock

¹From 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. ²The people quarrelled 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?’ ³But 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?’ ⁴So Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’ ⁵The 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. ⁶I 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. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’

It is only a matter of months since God liberated Israel from Egypt; from its slavery, poverty and forced building projects (1). They have had trouble with water and shortage of supplies already in this journey towards Sinai; in the wilderness of Shur and the wilderness of Sin (15.32–16.36). (Although there is some difficulty in accurately locating all these places after all these millennia your Bible atlas will trace

out the probable route they followed). It seems the leeks, melons and garlics of Egypt began to dominate their imaginations as the memory of slavery receded. The problem is simply stated; there is no water for the people to drink. The most basic element of life is missing.

Life in the desert is precarious indeed for Israel. Liberated they might be but quarrelsome and disagreeable they also are (2–3). Complaint and threat of violence are their weapons of choice in the battle with God. They pick on Moses, of course, because they think he is an easy target. Getting cross with God might be a dangerous game to play. So, they accuse Moses of ineffective and incompetent leadership. Moses' response to the people is to suggest that they are testing God's leadership. Moses is God's agent but their real quarrel is with God.

So severe is the people's anger that Moses fears for his life and his prayer reflects that (4). It is not the people he is worried about but his own safety. We are all human!

Nevertheless, God responds (5–6) and will himself stand at the place that Moses must strike to display his sovereign power and care for his people even if they prefer Egypt and slavery. Only YHWH can give the resources of life and the desert is the place to learn that. The journey requires that Israel trust that and trust that God will work through Moses.

The place names (7) are not about geography but about theology, about trust and mistrust. They already know that God will save and protect, acting on their behalf; they have been through worse and yet they choose the path of quarrel and contention. They demand that YHWH give an account of his sovereignty to them, demanding that God perform at their behest. They long for a utilitarian religion where YHWH will do as YHWH is told and be accountable to Israel.

The Bible never paints a pretty picture of the people of God, reckless, feckless, hardhearted and violent. As Psalm 95 points out below, they stand as a horrifying warning of how quickly and how far the people of God can descend into chaotic, disintegrating abusiveness.

But more needs to be said here because it is a story the central core of which is about God's leading as well as human complaint.

The people are people on the move, on the 'Way'. They have the promise of the Exodus and its hope but no fulfillment. And that is far from pleasant; indeed, it is chaotic and appears leaderless and directionless. Hence the attack on Moses. However, this what life on the move means. That is the life of faith and it is highly unattractive because it seems to lack security, safety nets and strategy.

In all of that we learn something of God's leadership. God leads and sets the itinerary even when it leads into a god-forsaken space where reality and perception become

totally confused. God's leading is not, however, coercive, so disobedience and rebellion are always possible and in this case a reality. The reason is simple God's leading does not always end up at an oasis, where we can find rest, relaxation, and comfortable. God's interests in bringing about the fulfillment of the promise is not the same as those of the people. Church and God are not always on the same page or singing from the same hymnbook.

In such a time the temptation is always to force God's hand by seeking a way to coerce God to show himself: "Is the Lord among us or not?" Well let's set about finding out. Surely we can find a way to hold God hostage to our whims of how divine life and power should be displayed.

That violates the goodness and faithfulness of God but it also endangers the life of faith. We can argue that God does not protect or heal because we (mostly others) don't have enough faith. If you had had enough faith God would have acted. God is the transactional CEO.

God's creative activity is not transactional but gracious so the Lord stands with Moses on the rock so the people do not take away the wrong impression. Moses is not the architect of creation or the promise of redemption or the fulfillment of hope. The Creator is the source of life in the midst of wilderness and human chaos.

Obedience to God's leading presence is a lifelong act of trust that can never be counted arithmetically, tallied as an account like superannuation. It is simply a lifelong trust in the One who leads on the "Way".

Someone has pointed out how this story is a model that is replicated right up to the present day. A problem is presented and a need clearly and unambiguously identified. There is a powerful intervention by God (through Moses) and a happy resolution of the problem through the gift of water. This is the form of much advertising. In advertising the product substitutes for God and when it is used some form of salvation follows; cleaner clothes, calmness, happiness.

Questions: How does the Exodus story critique the advertising story and what does it tell us about our world and ourselves? Is prayer about God performing at our behest? What are the problems with this approach? What does this story teach about trust? Dare we trust God to lead? Might that leave us open to risk? What do we learn about the God of Exodus and Wilderness?

Psalm 95

¹O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
³For the Lord is a great God,

and a great King above all gods.
⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
⁵The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

⁶O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
⁷For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

O that today you would listen to his voice!
⁸Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
⁹when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
¹⁰For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways.'
¹¹Therefore in my anger I swore,
'They shall not enter my rest.'

The theme of Psalm 95 is very clear: God reigns as owner of the world he created and as the creator of the covenant people; the people of God should therefore worship in joy and thanksgiving with open ears and obedient hearts. This psalm is a mixture of praise, prophetic admonition and enthronement of God as king. Psalms 96–99 express the theme of God's enthronement as king and Psalm 95 can be thought of as one bookend to those songs and Psalm 100 the other bookend. The Psalm probably has its origins in temple worship, emphasising the procession of joy, the prostration of humble worship and the listening of obedience. It is also part of the response to the devastation of the exile which has dominated Books I-III of the Psalter culminating in the great questions of Psalm 89.

The psalm begins with a call to worship that has influenced the patterns of Jewish and Christian worship ever since (1–5). Joy, praise, thanksgiving sung in robust voices is the best ways to come into the presence of God who is the solid unmoveable grounds of salvation (Psalms 18.2, 31, 46; 19.14; 28.1; 78.35; 89.26; Isaiah 44.8; Habakkuk 1.12). Being in the presence of the God of salvation is what worship is all about.

God is the God of salvation for two reasons that underlie all worship (3–5). God is the great King. All sovereignty is in his keeping. There is no-one who can match him. There is only one God. God reveals that great kingship in creating the universe and this means that the whole world is in God's hands.

In psalms and prophets the chaotic forces of nature or the triumph of wickedness among the nations resist God's reign (e.g. Psalm 1; 2). The circumstances that deny

God's sovereignty in this psalm are not these; rather it is God's own people who resist God's claim on their personal and social life. And they do that when they refuse to bow the heart in obedience to the word of God. They stop listening (7b).

The psalmist uses the OT story as scripture, as a cautionary tale of warning about what happens when the people decide that they know better than God (Exodus 17.1–7; Numbers 20.1–13 and Psalms 78. 18–20; 81.7; 106.32). They contended against God (Meribah) and put God on trial (Massah) because they doubted that he was in their midst or had the capacity or will to care for them (see the notes above). They had experienced the Exodus and God's great deeds in the wilderness sustaining and protecting them but they drew no lessons from that. They hardened their hearts (8) and in verse 10 that is explained to mean that their minds and wills no longer corresponded with that of God. Although God pardoned his people as a whole the rebels would not enter the land of rest. There can be no doubt that the events of Exodus 17 that we have already explored weighed heavily on the psalmist's spirit. It also weighed just as heavily on the writer to the Hebrews (3.7–4.13) advising his fellow Christians caught between the hope of promise and the journey to fulfillment: "Take care brothers and sisters, that none of you has an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God."

The underlying vision of this psalm is that in the created order the people of God have the beautiful gracious gift of being God's loved ones (6–7). But loved ones have a responsibility to love the Lover and listen to the lover's voice. When hardness enters the human heart and breaks up human love, when people no longer listen to each other, when minds and wills no longer correspond we find it tragic and painful. How much more when the Lover is God and the hard heart is ours.

"Today" is the clear challenge from the psalmist; today is the day to listen and love again. The great God who rules the world and whose rule will one day be fully established in Christ wants to rule the human heart today. The future is present in the Spirit.

Questions: Would people coming into our building see our worship as an opportunity to find the veil between heaven and earth broken? Would they hear the voice of God?

Hebrews 3.7–4.13 is an early Christian commentary on this text especially Psalm 95.7b-11. Take time to reflect on the author's argument and themes of warning and word, faith and obedience, and the place of community and fellowship.

What are some of the challenges you have discovered on the road from promise to fulfillment? Take some time to reflect on how you faced them? Are their lessons?

Romans 5.1–11

Results of Justification

⁵Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and 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.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For 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. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

This is one of the great gospel passages of the New Testament. It begins a new section in the apostle's letter to the Romans that explores the deeply personal reconciliation between the creator God and the human race in and through Jesus the Messiah. This passage is the introduction to a passage that finishes at 8.39 and explores the logic and action of divine love. This is the beginning of the section in the letter that assumes that Paul has proven his thesis in 3.21–26, that God has accomplished the justification of sinners in the Messiah Jesus, and that God will then complete that task and bring them to glory. God's faithfulness to his covenant in the cross of Messiah Jesus (3.21–4.25) Paul will now express in terms of covenant love.

Verses 1–2 summarise the argument to this point; that justification results in peace with God, access to God's favour, and that leads on to the hope of glory. So we might say that salvation has a past, present and a future. God's justice expressed in the cross, has led to peace now; a deeply personal reconciliation of God and sinner through Jesus Christ and by grace alone. That means that the justified one now has hope; the glory of God. Adam is restored to his proper place as the vice regent of God and as the bearer of the glory of God's presence in his person. That remains a work in progress to be completed in the future.

But what of the present (3–5)? That, according to Paul, is marked by suffering and the work of the Spirit. Paul may boast of the hope of glory but he also boasts in tribulations because they lead to this hope. In the Spirit suffering is turned to hope because God's love pours into our hearts, and suffering turns out a tried and true person steeped in hope.

This is not a message we are familiar with. Celebrating one's suffering sounds depressingly morbid. After all, our inalienable right is not only to pursue happiness but also to attain it as soon as. We have politicians and lawyers to make sure we do.

Paul has a different view of the end of humanity; a character that reflects the character of the crucified Messiah who reflects the character of God. It is the development of that character that the Spirit flows in love. This happiness is best called peace and hope deeply embedded in the expressed love of God in the cross. This is the deep root of the Spirit's life in us that allows us to know what it means to be in right relationship with God and others. (Note: Paul is quite vague about suffering here. He will pick up the theme in chapter 8 in more careful detail.)

Verses 6–8 explain that the cross is the foundation for all of this. Christ's death 'for us' while we were still ungodly is a measure of the great love of God, the source of our hope and rejoicing.

Verses 9–11 points out that through Christ we have been justified, we have been reconciled and in the future we will be saved from judgment and its consequences. Paul thinks of salvation as the future experience of the resurrection life of Christ that we will share. That is our hope, grounded in justification, reconciliation, suffering and the Spirit. Our only response is to boast in the love and grace of God. The passage begins with peace and ends in reconciliation. Paul's idea of God's faithful righteousness for sinners is not a legal fiction but a restoration of life and fellowship, of freedom and community with the ever-faithful covenant God.

Questions: Do you really believe what Paul is saying in 5.1? Do you really believe what Paul is saying about the work of Messiah Jesus? What is your hope? Where does the hope of glory fit in your life? What difference has it made for you?

Paul makes the point in 5.1–2 that the believer can have full confidence in God's work because God alone can bring peace. Do you walk the way in that confidence, not in yourself, but in the crucified God?

How might God's reconciling action in Christ become the ground and model for the reconciliation of human enemies (Tom Wright)?

John 4.5–42

⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The 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.) ¹⁰Jesus 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.’
¹¹The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?’¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’¹³Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴but 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.’¹⁵The 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.’

¹⁶Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’¹⁷The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”;¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’¹⁹The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet.²⁰Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’²¹Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’²⁵The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’²⁶Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

²⁷Just 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?’²⁸Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,²⁹‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, ‘Rabbi, eat something.’³²But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’³³So the disciples said to one another, ‘Surely no one has brought him something to eat?’³⁴Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.³⁵Do 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.³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.³⁷For here the saying holds true, “One sows and another reaps.”³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.’

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days.⁴¹And many more believed because of his word.⁴²They 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 Saviour of the world.’

Jesus is on a journey from Judea heading north back to Galilee and to do that he passes through Samaria and he stops at the city of Sychar southeast of the capital Sebaste and in view of Mt. Gerizim (4–6). It is a famous place of patriarchal life and the gift of Jacob to Joseph of water introduces the two main themes: gift and the water of life. But it was also a place of contention. Jewish hostility to Mt. Gerizim's claims for the exclusive worship of God led to the destruction of the shrine in 200 BCE by Jewish soldiers. Jesus stops because he is weary as the middle of the day approaches having probably been on the move from very early morning in the cool of the day.

There he strikes up a conversation with a Samaritan woman asking for a gift of water (7–26). Unlike Nicodemus, a named male leader of the Jewish establishment, she remains unnamed, a female of a foreign and enemy people. Jesus cuts through all the boundaries; historical, political, racial and gender. It is a scandalous encounter as the disciples are away buying food and Jesus is alone. Notice the number of times Jews and Samaritans are contrasted and she does open up her salvo against 'the Jew' insultingly. But like Nicodemus she shapes her questions and debates within the frameworks she knows; Jacob, Joseph; Jew, Samaritan; male, female; married, not married; Gerizim, Jerusalem; Messiah, prophet. And Jesus, as he did with Nicodemus, destroys the foundations of all those frameworks and demands she look anew at them all through him.

Jesus offers himself to the woman as living water, the gift of God, and in the process does not treat her as an ignorant child, or a sexual deviant but as an intelligent inquiring person whose questions can be candidly and truthfully met. In this way he draws her to the living water. She chooses like Nicodemus to take Jesus' words at face value thinking of a stream of flowing water and suggests that Jacob's gift of water was as good as it gets. But Jesus' gift has its origins, not in a patriarch, but in the creator of water, the great giver of life and its goal is eternal life, the very life of God himself.

But the story does not stop there (16–42). As she questions him in the terms she understands again Jesus moves the story forward from 'the gift of God' to 'who it is who is speaking to you' (10). He moves the discussion from sectarian debate to true worship, worship that is not geographically or historically oriented but alive in the Spirit of truth. He reveals himself to her as "I am", the great revelation of this Gospel; the Word made flesh who brings light and life into the world.

She becomes a living witness of living water to her people, her village and her clan because she is now a growing believer. Her witness is not entirely clear, certainly not learned, but it is personal, not sectarian or doctrinal, so now the villagers must examine the claims of Jesus for themselves and respond to them. Mission is not a spectator sport but a personal encounter with the I Am, the Word made flesh, and the living water.

The disciples finally catch up with Jesus (a metaphor well worth pondering) and are astonished at the whole scene. No wonder. This is mission outside the boundaries of gender, sect and race. They are too afraid to ask questions when she is there but when she leaves they bring the conversation back to the mundane. Eat something and you will feel better and we can get over it and go about our usual business.

Jesus will not miss the opportunity to talk about His and the Father's mission. The Samaritan woman is central to it.

The key is found in verse 33. The will is God's so is the work but Jesus is sent to complete his work. We are told at the end of this Gospel to that "As the Father has sent me so I send you". We are sowers and reapers in God's harvest of the future that is happening now. It is described as eternal life and in this gospel that means, not happy ever after in heaven, but the joys and wonder of new creation, a new order of being human and creation together. And the Light of the world and the Water of life shed light and life on the present to transform it. But it is God's will and work. Our vocation is to enter that will and that work and not be distracted.

The harvest is the witness of the Samaritans who believe because, "...we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world." (42) The world is being restored to its true purpose.

This is a story of many dimensions as all good stories are and given our present interest in mission it deserves considerable reflection in the light of the misunderstandings that sometimes surrounds that subject.

Questions: Which dimension of this story speaks to you? Meditate on that and ask where God might be leading you? Explore your own I-Thou relationship with the Word made flesh and the Living Water. Does it drive you to want to go further, explore deeper, witness to its delight?

How can disciples misunderstand Jesus and His mission?

The woman is never judged as a sinner but portrayed as a crucial witness. What does this reveal about God and his mission?

Immediate experience of the Living Water is the key to this story. What does it tell us about God's will and work and our role in it?