

Divergence on the Lectionary - Third Sunday in Lent, Year A

First Reading

Exodus 17:1–7

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” And 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 grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 5:1–11

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved

by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 4:5–42

So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings 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 nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." 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 now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 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 is seeking such people 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 (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" So the woman left

her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” They went out of the town and were coming to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and 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 town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” 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 indeed the Savior of the world.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

You know, I don’t think it’s a bad thing to cry out for water in a dry place. I don’t think that qualifies as “testing the Lord.” I don’t think it’s a great thing that the people were about to take out their fear and frustration on Moses. After all, he’d just separated the waters of the Red Sea so that they could cross on dry ground. And when they grew hungry they’d grumbled against Moses, and he’d appealed to the Lord, and they’d received manna. It isn’t as though Moses hadn’t come through for them before.

But the people of God had lived for a long time under slavery before the Exodus. According to the “Sages,” anywhere from a minimum of 86 to a maximum of 116 years. I think that breeds a certain mindset. Living as a free person can be pretty overwhelming to someone who’s lived under bondage for a long time. I’m reminded of the man I knew when I was a prison chaplain. (volunteer) He’d been in prison most of his adult life, and was in his late 50’s. He was finally paroled and within two weeks he’d taken an unloaded gun into a liquor store to “rob” it. All he wanted was to get back to what he knew.

So these people, who'd lived in bondage a lot longer than my prison acquaintance, were sort of suspicious of the new freedom they enjoyed. And when it began to feel scary, they began to grumble, to wonder if they'd have been better off in Egypt. They'd lived so long with a God who felt so far away while their Egyptian masters abused them that they had a really hard time trusting.

In our reading for this week they began to worry about water in the wilderness. Yes, they'd crossed the Red Sea. Yes, they had this white stuff, this daily bread called manna. But you can't live without water, and they started to fear again, and they began to grumble at the man who'd convinced them it was time to leave Egypt.

And they cried out. "Give us water to drink," and, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" Had it stopped there, I don't think we'd have the command that Jesus quoted in our Gospel text for 1 Lent from Deuteronomy 6:16. "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah." They didn't stop there. They "tested" the Lord, but we only get the details about that "test" right at the end of our reading. What made that cry of fear into a test was the question, "Is the Lord among us or not."

I think that we can restate that question this way, "Are you a God I can count on or not?" And that takes us back a couple of weeks to the Gospel text from 1 Lent, when Jesus was taken to the pinnacle of the Temple and invited to throw himself down because,

"He will command his angels concerning you,"

and

"On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone."

In other words, say to God, "Are you a God I can count on or not?" Test God. And Jesus declined.

There's this thing that happens when I test God this way, when I define what it looks like for God to be "among us." Sometimes God does what I demand, as He did at Massah and Meribah. But you know what? When it happens that way, all the joy is snatched right out of it. When I'm so busy telling God what God ought to be doing, there's little room left for the joy of being surprised by God's love and mercy.

This doesn't mean that in a moment of great trial, like the thirst the Israelites were enduring, that I cannot call out, "God! I'm thirsty! Help!" But it does mean that God

would rather I did not phrase it the way the disciples did when they were caught in a boat in a storm, “Don’t you even care?” I may not always understand what’s going on around me, and I may cry out in distress, but I will do my best not to make God’s response the measure of Their character.

Second Reading

There are two rather disparate sections of this reading, to my mind, each demanding a separate reflection, so to keep this from growing to an unwieldy length, I’m going to try (however unlikely!) to keep each section brief. The two sections, as I see them, circle around two ideas. 1) Having been justified we rejoice in our suffering, and 2) While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

So here’s number one.

I think that the idea of rejoicing in one’s sufferings has sometimes been taken to extents that defy reason. There is no doubt that Christians over the years have sought out suffering, so as to share in Jesus’ suffering, and rejoiced in that which they sought out. I don’t think Paul would have approved. Even so, Paul was able to write, “Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice!” to the Philippians from his prison cell in Ephesus, where he faced likely death. Paul was able to rejoice *in the midst of* his sufferings. I don’t think he rejoiced *because of* them. We might be tempted to think that he means to rejoice because of them in this passage from Romans, in that he goes on to list the benefits that accrue from them, endurance, character, hope. But I still don’t think that’s what he means. I think that he is saying that he can rejoice in the midst of them in part because he knows of those benefits. That may be splitting hairs, but I think they’re important hairs. Reading it the way I do, we find Paul imitating Jesus, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.” (Hebrews 12:2)

There is a second element to this rejoicing in suffering that I want to mention before moving on. It follows immediately on his reminder of our justification. “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is the justification in which we stand that enables us to rejoice in the midst of our sufferings. We are prone to convert suffering into affliction. That is, we take the hardships that we endure and we change them into judgments on our worthiness, our value before God. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t be as likely to ask “Why me?” as we are, as if there were something we’d done.

But when we know that we are justified by the Blood of Christ, our pain isn’t complicated by the thought that this pain is a sign to others of our sin, a great scarlet letter marking us. And it makes it easier for us to rejoice in the midst of the pain.

That's enough on part one. Now for part two.

Paul begins by saying, "While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly." This adjective, "weak" is really important in the letter to the Romans. It pops up several other times (in its verbal, not adjectival form). And it refers to those who do not know themselves justified by faith. Many commentators read the "weak" in Rome to be Christians who still feel compelled to abide by the strictures of the Law. Mark Nanos, in his book *The Mystery of Romans*, makes a convincing case that Paul speaks here of the Jews in Rome, in whose synagogue the Christians meet.

This has some really important ramifications for how we read other sections of Romans, but here what is important is not the Jewishness of the "weak" but their state as those who did not know themselves justified by faith. The faith that they had did not justify them, set them right before God. And it was these people, the "weak" whom God first reconciled through the death of His Son.

No faith was required first. God reconciled them (and us, of course) to Himself through Jesus' death, "while we were enemies." This is a pattern with God, who does the saving first, then asks obedience after. The saving is never conditional. This is key to the Gospel, key to Paul's theology, I think.

In order to set this second section of the reading in context I have to quibble briefly with our translators, both ESV and NRSV this time, who added the words "of God" to the end of verse nine. "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of *God*." Those words don't occur in the Greek of Paul's letter. It's just "saved from the wrath." While it's fair to think that's what he meant, I think that leaving off those words was Paul's intention, and so it should be ours.

This section of chapter five comes immediately after Paul's discussion of our ability to rejoice in the midst of our sufferings because we know ourselves to be justified. I suggested above that one of the things we do to ourselves in the midst of suffering is ask, "Why me?" That is, we ask, "Why are you angry at me? What have I done?" But we who are justified are "saved from wrath." We know better than to think we're subject to wrath. We don't complicate pain with condemnation. We are "saved from the wrath." Yes, it's the implied wrath of God, but in fact we know ourselves subject to none, so Paul left off "the wrath of *God*." Because it isn't.

Now the two sections seem to contribute to one another.

Gospel Text

Have you ever told one of those long, involved jokes, only to get to the end and mess up the punch line? I know I have. How frustrating.

Well, that's what our translators did to this passage from John 4. There's an absolute thunderclap in the text that, by fooling around with the word order, they reduce to a sneeze. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, he speaks to her, tells her of a living water that is available to her, tells her all about her life and her many husbands. Then tells her that the difference in places of worship won't matter going forward because God desires worship "in spirit and in truth. The woman says to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things," and here comes the thunder. Jesus says, "I am. The one speaking to you."

I AM.

Some of you reading these Divergences will already know that throughout John Jesus identifies Himself with God by speaking of Himself through the Greek rendition of the tetragrammaton, ἐγώ εἰμι, ego eimi, YHWH, I AM. This is the first time He does it (and unless you read it in the Greek you'll miss it thanks to the translators). He says this to a Samaritan. This is the mic drop of all mic drops, and the hearer isn't even a faithful Jew.

The Samaritans did the best they knew how to honor the faith they'd inherited. But they had their own places of worship, Shechem and Mount Gerizim. Still, they had the same Books of Moses as the Jews. Deuteronomy commanded a blessing on Gerizim. (11:29) Abram had built an altar to God at Shechem (Gen. 12:7), the first altar built in the land of promise. So their decisions for places to worship make sense.

But they weren't terribly Jewish. After the Assyrians sent the ten northern tribes into the diaspora, they repopulated the land with peoples from other nations they'd conquered. This was their major way of managing conquered lands, by moving people from their ancestral homes so that they had no deep allegiance to the place in which they lived. It served to keep down rebellion.

So the Samaritans were those who'd been imported into the the land formerly known as Israel (vs. Judah in the south) and who'd tried to take up the practices and religion of their new home. And for this effort, they were looked down upon by their Jewish neighbors.

But “real Jews” or not, they worshiped the same God, read the same holy books, and God’s self naming at the burning bush, “I am that I am” would have been deeply inscribed in their worship and thinking.

In this reading Jesus violates any number of taboos. He speaks to a Samaritan, she takes note of that. He speaks to a woman who is alone, his disciples take note of that. But to take the name of God for Himself? This is an earth shaking self-revelation. Only earlier in this chapter (and last week) we heard Jesus say that He cannot speak to Nicodemus (a Pharisee) of heavenly things because he can’t even grasp earthly things yet. But here, He can. And does.

When I first wrote this divergence three years ago, I was taken by the idea that Jesus would only reveal Himself this fully to the lowliest, and that still holds for me, but this year I am captured by another truth. Jesus reveals Himself fully as I AM to the one *outside*. I hear a lot of theologians and preachers speak of ministry to “those on the margins” but that doesn’t do this justice. The woman at the well isn’t on the margins. She is well beyond them. She has been cast out. She is *other*.

And while my first take on this passage led me to consider one of my heroes, Heidi Baker, this new take brings to mind the social activist and mystic of the 30’s and 40’s, Simone Weil. Weil was born into a relatively well-to-do agnostic Jewish family in France in the early 20th century, but found herself moved by the plight of the workers’ class. She became a teacher and taught off and on, but wrote and advocated for workers and unionization. In the latter years of her life she was deeply moved by Christian faith, having (at least) three deep mystical experiences of Christ and His love. (Two of which were associated with St. Francis.)

And here is where she becomes meaningful to me with regard to this Divergence. Though she was deeply committed to her relationship to God in Christ, she refused baptism. She remained convinced that she was called to be in solidarity with those that the Church (she was drawn to Roman Catholicism, but rejected the institutional church) excluded. I think she’d have found great solace in Jesus’ decision to reveal Himself so fully to the woman at the well. I haven’t read her writings well enough to know if she wrote of this, but it wouldn’t surprise me at all.

As I ponder this reading from John, I find myself challenged to identify my own fences, to figure out whom it is that I put beyond them. This is where I suspect that Jesus is revealing Himself most fully. And yes, I also draw comfort from the idea that when I am most excluded (I don’t call these posts “Divergences” for nothing.) Jesus is also close, declaring His identity, revealing His Presence. But I don’t look or listen often enough.

I do think the reflections on lowliness and Heidi Baker still have merit, and so I'll include them below, in case they speak more clearly to you this year.

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And that shouts to me that it is only the mostly lowly to whom the things of heaven can be revealed. This is a woman whose life history leaves her so scorned that she must go to the well to draw water in the heat of the day, when no one else will be there (the sixth hour, mid afternoon). She is the most scorned among a people who knew deep scorn themselves. And she is the one to whom Jesus first fully reveals His identity.

I can't see all this and not be reminded of Heidi Baker, whose ministry in Mozambique and whose teaching all around the world has touched me so deeply at different times in my life. Instead of writing about her, I'll quote her at length.

I have found that, just when I think I have surrendered my all to the Lord, He gently, graciously, uncovers a new layer of resistance in me that even I didn't know was there. For a few years now, I have preached a message I call "Lower Still." This sums up the process of Jesus tenderly shaping, patiently reshaping, and then gloriously filling our lives with Himself. Do we think we have humbled ourselves and surrendered everything to Him? We can still go lower; there is still more for us to give up.

Surrendering everything to Jesus sounds risky, as though it could be painful, difficult, demanding. Many ask, "If I completely surrender to Him, with reckless devotion, will I still be me?"

Here is what I have found to be true. Yes, it's risky, but the reward vastly outweighs the risk. Yes, it can be painful, difficult and demanding, but the joy and all-surpassing peace that Jesus gives can hardly be compared to such fleeting inconveniences.

Most of all, Jesus doesn't rob you of being you. You don't somehow become less than yourself because Jesus' presence is larger in you. It's just the opposite; the more you surrender to Him, the more you become who Father always intended you to be.

This is all part of God's upside economy, which defies the narrow-minded, one-dimensional, limited wisdom of human thinking. In choosing to become nothing, we become everything we were ever meant to be.

As always, Jesus is our model. He made Himself as nothing so His Father might be fully glorified through Him. In Philippians, Paul urges us to imitate Jesus' humility:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Philippians 2:1-4

As we do this, we'll not only find our purpose in Jesus' Kingdom; we'll also truly find ourselves.

So simple. So difficult.

Quotation is from "[Reckless Devotion - 365 Days of Inspiration](#)"