

Lent 3 – A (2020)
Exodus 17:1-7
Romans 5:1-11

Covid19 is still spreading over the world. An oil war has broken out. The stock market has dropped precipitously to shocking lows. Now, some experts say, a recession is likely this year. The United Methodist Church is facing a separation at our General Conference this May. There are seemingly so many things to be fearful about.

When tragedy strikes, some people will even complain to God. God! How did this happen? Why did this happen to me? People will often look for someone or something to blame for whatever is still standing when all the dust settles. Or complain when things don't go the way they want or expect. It is human nature to complain.

But if God is with us, why do we complain? Why do we worry about whether there will be enough money to do the things that are needed to continue to do the work we are called to do as church? Why do we worry about whether we will have the resources to fulfill our mission? Why are congregational meetings sometimes exercises in survival rather than a celebration of God's activity in our midst? Can we afford to pay our apportionments this month? If God is with us, why can't we meet our budgets and fill our pews? Is the LORD among us or not?

Our opening Bible reading today offers a curious dilemma. Though the Israelites faithfully journey as God commands, they come to a place with no water. How could they be sure that God was still with them? And so they resort to complaining – again – this time about water.

God had just delivered them from thirst in Exodus 15:22-27. There were in an area known as the Wilderness of Sin. When they camped at Rephidim, there was no water. Moses was again on the hot seat. The complaint of verse 3, that Moses only brought the people out of Israel to be killed in the desert, was another tired refrain. They had said this at the Red Sea (14:11), and once before when they were hungry (16:3). It appears that wandering Israel's pattern was to blame the leader(s) when things went wrong. But

they are not really quarreling with Moses or Aaron; they are doubting God.

God's solution was not to *strike the people* for ingratitude and grumbling. God instead commanded that Moses use his staff to *strike a rock* at Horeb to obtain water (verses 5-6). This same staff had come to be associated with miracles and power throughout Moses' ministry. The place was named Massah and Meribah, which meant *testing* and *striving* (verse 7). In the midst of their difficulties, God sends grace.

How many times has the LORD solved one problem for us and then we have another complaint for Him? Where is our faith? Where is our patience?

Not that long ago, less than three months ago, we celebrated Christmas: the coming of the Savior, Emanuel, God with us! I wonder how much has changed. Too often we settle for the same ol' – same ol' – instead of embracing the new things that God offers.

It's like the story of old grizzly bear who roamed the forest terrorizing campers. A group of scouts had set up camp one evening, and then all gone down to the river for a late-night swim. The old bear came crashing into their campsite and spotted a kettle of soup simmering on the campfire, with the lid bounding up and down from the steam. The old bear lumbered over to the pot and greedily picked the kettle up. It burned his hands badly, but instead of dropping it, he clutched it tighter and tighter, for "hugging" is a natural defense mechanism for a grizzly bear. The more it burned him, the tighter he hugged it.

Paul reminds us that Christ died for a world that continues to clutch the very things that hurt it, and, being justified by God's love, frees us to drop those boiling kettles that only bring misery.

If a parent goes to great extremes to buy his child a grand piano, will he then deny that same son piano lessons? Of course not! And according to our reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans, if God has gone so far as to give us His only begotten Son, will He not give us all other things vital to our well-being as well? If He has given us Jesus, will He not give us strength, food, friends, the spirit, endurance, and whatever else we need as well? It is because of the

length God was willing to go on the cross for us that we can be assured He will not stop short for all our needs.

Living in a desert environment, it would have been no news to Moses that you could get water from striking a rock. Porous rocks like limestone can trap small amounts of water locked in by mineral deposits. Striking a rock can break away these deposits that stop up the water and cause water to stream forth. The miracle is that it was a sufficient flow of water for a party estimated at over a million people plus animals! God's sign to the Israelites was something like Jesus' sign to Simon Peter when He had Peter cast out his nets and bring in a catch so large the nets began to break. It wasn't impossible that there were fish precisely there, though Peter had been fishing all night and it was unlikely, but God alone can provide in such abundance. Sometimes God asks his people to do ordinary things and to trust in Him to produce extraordinary results.

Suffering and difficulty are part of our lives, but suffering, according to Paul, results in fruit. His Letter says, "Suffering produces." When pain happens in a person's life, it is not neutral. It makes things happen. It "produces."

For one it brings bitterness, cynicism, and anger with God. For another it brings sensitivity, dependence upon God, and wisdom.

Have you ever noticed what happens when you drop a potato and an egg into the same pot of boiling water? The egg gets hard--boiled while the potato gets soft. Two different things react so differently to the same experience. And it's the same with people. Two persons with cancer -- the one grows hard--boiled; the other soft; the one grows in faith; the other grows in fear and despair. And the text today tells us who and what makes the difference by using words like "justified," "faith," "peace," "God," "Christ," "grace," and "rejoice."

In short, for the Christian and suffering, God has changed our nature, our insides, so that our response to suffering can produce "character," "endurance," and "hope." Justified by faith, through God's grace in Jesus Christ, we have peace with God and assurance of moving on to entire salvation. Paul's Letter reminds that in Jesus Christ, the love of God has been poured into our hearts, like ever-flowing streams of water, through the Holy Spirit.

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through Jesus. Our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ affords us the opportunity to have peace. It doesn't necessarily mean that all threats will disappear immediately. It doesn't necessarily mean that we'll have no more problems when we have faith in the Lord. It does mean, though, that because of our faith we can be confident that God is in charge. Through Jesus Christ we know that all things will work together for good to the one who loves God and is called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). Are you looking for peace? Look to Jesus.

The Sundays of Lent, although we tend to focus on our sin and what we may need to change in our lives, stop doing or start doing, are not penitential and they are not an extended Holy Week! Instead, they are feasts with the risen Lord -- as are all Sundays -- days on which we celebrate what God has done and is still doing and is yet to do in our lives. To celebrate the occasions on which God has produced water from the rock and the water-filled rocks which we are yet to encounter.

"But God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Rom. 5:8) If that verse isn't filled with hope, nothing is. None of us have to become perfect people to receive God's love because God died for us "Just As I Am."

God does not leave His people alone in the wilderness. God responds with grace and the journey resumes: "Go on ahead . . . I will be standing there in front of you . . ." God's faithful presence and provision prevails over the Israelites' lack of trust and faith. The passage concludes, "Is the LORD with us or not?" The question remains critical for faith's journey: for us as individuals and for us as a church. So does the answer -- water springs from a rock to bring life to the wilderness. Strike the rock and grace gushes forth!