

Just by Chance – Lent 3A

[Exodus 17:1-7](#) [Psalm 95](#) [Romans 5:1-11](#) [John 4:5-42](#)

Just by chance, we are living in this day and age. Our life stories will contain the chapter about the great Virus Epidemic of 2020. This is a watershed moment. Today's story from Exodus has a similar ring: There was no water. In other words, life could not continue as 'was.' Moses called the place *Massah* and *Meribah*, because there the people quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Today's events certainly have certainly prompted quarrelling. All too many are minimizing, posturing, denying the validity of a common effort, and doubting the likelihood of God's presence. We may isolate or try to blame God, Fate or foreigners; heck, we may even get a miracle, with a true vaccine springing out of a rock, but more likely, we will have to accompany and help each other: ride this out together.

When the psalmist warns, "Do not harden your hearts, as you did in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, even though they knew better, for they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways.' Therefore in my anger I swore, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" We can no longer conceive of God as a spiteful, vindictive force. Whoever God is, she is not going around swearing nor loathing. But the words of the prophet still ring with truth: If we do not conduct ourselves in peaceful and gracious ways in the midst of this kind of crisis, if we harden our hearts, the negative repercussions of that attitude will pester and poison our common life immeasurably and for generations.

When Paul writes to the Romans that we boast in our sufferings, it is not that pain and confusion are inherently good. He is wisely pointing out that enduring and enjoying life by expressing compassion, empathy and charity, even in the most frightening and tragic of circumstances is the richest and most

rewarding existence. His formula says that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope is all any of us can ever desire. Even those of us who are hoarding t.p. live in hope of using it.

Rabbi Josef Kanefsky offers this reflection: “One of the brand new terms that has entered our daily conversation is ‘social distancing,’ shorthand for the physical precautions we take if we want to protect ourselves and others. But the words themselves can be part of the problem. Language is a powerful shaper of thought, and the very last thing we need right now is a mindset of mutual distancing. We should be thinking in the exact opposite way.

“So, every hand we don’t shake must turn into a phone call we make to check on somebody. Every embrace that we avoid begs transformation into an expression of concern we offer. Every extra inch we put between ourselves and others can hold a prayer of support and a creative thought of how we might be helpful to that person, should the need arise. ‘Distancing,’ if misunderstood and misapplied will take a heavy toll, not only on our community’s strength and resilience, but on the very integrity and meaning of our spiritual commitment.” It was for times like these that we entered into covenant with Creation; this is our walk: together.

Because of the impossibility of knowing that you are a carrier of this virus until you have already been contagious for days, one of the ways we take care of each other these days is by not embracing, not getting too close and not touching hands. Hugs and kisses and handshakes (even fistbumps which, after all, involve hands touching) are out – for now. But politeness, courtesy, mutual recognition and acknowledgement are very much ‘in,’ for now and forever.

Many of us are adopting a slight bow, with one’s own palms together, when greeting one another or parting company. In use throughout much of the world, and known as ‘Namaste,’ it is a way

to show your connection with another person without touching them. In the past few weeks, it has also taken on the significance of avoiding germ transmission. The word itself comes from Sanskrit and means, more or less, "I bow to you." In joining my palms, I show respect for you by pausing in whatever I am doing, just for a moment's togetherness. Not only that, because the fingers are pressure points of the eyes, the ears, and the mind, pressing them together is said to activate those points, inducing us to remember and cherish one another more wholly. So they say.

Here is the Gospel reading for today, John 4: 5-10:

So he 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?" 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."

This picturesque story serves as a vehicle for the lovely metaphor of Living Water, the grace of God in Christ that forever slakes our spiritual thirst. But the context adds a great deal of meaning to the message. The nature of Living Water is revealed through the details of the story. Samaritans in general were

considered to be objectionable by Jesus' contemporaries, because their cultural practices and religious beliefs were at odds. They were outsiders, aliens, and thoroughly unsavoury. Then there is the woman's gender, which meant that Jesus' unchaperoned interaction with her was a departure from accepted behavioral norms. And finally, as the story unfolds, we learn that she has led a colourful, unconventional and questionable sexual life. By conventional standards, the woman is downright sketchy. Yet she is the one to whom Jesus freely offers this Living Water. When it comes to love, and the peace that passes understanding, there are no membership criteria, entrance fees, screening interviews; no background checks. Everyone deserves our respect, our opportunities, our just treatment, our compassion. Everyone. So the Bible says.

Here, from an essay by Jon Mooallem published yesterday:

“So much had suddenly scrambled; the future was unclear. During those four and a half minutes in 1964, Anchorage seemed to be passing fitfully through an inflection point in history; life was ripping into a before and an after. ‘Even in those moments while the earthquake was still shaking the earth,’ one man recalled, ‘I kept thinking: ‘What will Alaskans do now?’

“We all know there are moments when the world we take for granted instantaneously changes, when reality is abruptly upended and the unimaginable overwhelms real life. We don't walk around thinking about it, but we know that instability is always there: At random, and without warning, something switches on and scrambles our lives.

“News of the Great Alaska Earthquake reached a small team of sociologists at Ohio State University early the following morning. The Disaster Research Center at Ohio State was a unique new institute, aiming to send social scientists out to wherever disaster struck, as quickly as possible, in order to dispassionately document the resulting disarray.

“The Cold War was escalating. In the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, Americans were desperate to prepare for the possibility of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. One current insight was that a bomb dropped on the United States wouldn’t just cause physical destruction, but pandemonium, desperation and barbarism among survivors. ‘The experts foretold a mass outbreak of hysterical neurosis among the civilian population,’ the social scientist Richard M. Titmuss wrote in 1950. ‘They would behave like frightened and unsatisfied children.’

“But when the disaster researchers started touching down in Anchorage, a mere 28 hours after the earthquake, they almost immediately began discovering the opposite: The community was meeting the situation with a staggering amount of collaboration and compassion.

“Right after the shaking stopped, ordinary citizens began crawling through the ruins downtown, searching for survivors, and using ropes to heave people out of the debris. When Presbyterian Hospital started filling with gas after the quake, Boy Scouts who’d been distributing phone books in the neighborhood helped walk the hospital’s 22 patients down three or four flights of stairs, and an armada of taxis and other civilian drivers pulled up outside to evacuate everyone to a second hospital, across town.

“‘Everybody jumped right in,’ one man who’d been on the scene told the sociologists. ‘Everybody was trying to do a little bit of everything for everybody.’ Something surprising had been shaken loose in Anchorage: a dormant capacity — even an impulse — for people to come together and care for one another that felt largely inaccessible in ordinary life.

“Watching the slow, menacing spread of a virus is altogether different from reacting to the obvious, instantaneous shock of a quake. For most of us, the danger of this unfolding disaster is still invisible and diffuse. And yet any resilient and successful response has to be rooted in the same profound feelings of interconnectedness that arose instantaneously in Anchorage,

some pervasive and bracing obligation to one another and our collective safety.

“Washing your hands, staying home when you’re sick, limiting travel, keeping yourself healthy, not touching your face — little of what we’re being told to do feels particularly heroic or world-changing, or nearly enough to satisfy an anxious mind. But for a lot of us, it is, in fact, the job that’s in front of us right now — the role that these disordered circumstances are calling each of us, at a minimum, to play.

“In ordinary times, we suffer alone; any acute experience of our own vulnerability can isolate us, or even make us resentful of others: ‘The victim often feels discriminated against since there are others who have been spared.’ But a disaster affects everyone, and peels us away from “mundane matters” to the ‘very issue of human life itself.’

“When danger, loss and suffering become a public phenomenon, all those who share in the experience are brought together in a very powerful psychological sense. An unrelenting immediacy sets in: ‘Worries about the past and the future are unrealistic when judged against the realities of the moment,’ the sociologists wrote, and distinctions between people fall away, leaving only ‘human beings responding to one another as human beings.’

“Thrown all together, in one unrelenting present, we are made to recognize in one another what we deny most vehemently about ourselves: In the end, it’s our vulnerability that connects us.”

Just by chance, we are all affected by the COVID-19, from those who have sickened and died to those of us preparing for the worst hoping for the best and counting on each other. Just by chance, we are all in it together

Be peaceful, be helpful, be safe, and stay in touch. While we are apart in body we remain together in spirit. Sally Young has shared Lynn Ungar’s powerful poem, composed last week:

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath--
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.
And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.
Promise this world your love--
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.