

The Third Sunday in Lent – March 15, 2020 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95:1-7, Romans 5:1-11, Gospel John 4:5-42

Some weeks ago, I sat down and outlined the themes of the sermons for Lent. I was rather proud of myself actually, prepared for Lent and then the world changed, the COVID -19 virus became a reality in our lives and my preparation when out the window. Maybe some Lent in the future those sermons will get preached, but for now, I feel a need to deal with what is in the moment. And what is in the moment for most of us is how do we live with this new reality, temporary as it hopefully is. How do we make decisions for ourselves and our families, how do we respond without overreacting? How do we stay connected to the larger human community? How do we deal with the anxiety of the unknown? This experience, which is new to all or at least most of us can be in a rather strange way a conversion experience. Conversion after all, is simply another way of talking about change. We are all at least for the moment changing the way we live, even if it is simply that we wash our hands more regularly. The world has intruded in an unavoidable way on what was to be a peaceful and spiritual Lent. In the words of Martin Smith, a monk of the Society of St. John the Evangelist: "Lent is not a temporary affectation of gloom or a brisk interlude for self-improvement. It is for being in the wilderness..." Wilderness seems to me to be where we find ourselves in at this moment. A wilderness is place of chaos, unknown, fear, and mystery. Some years ago, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, a group went out into the Judean desert. We got off our modern, air-conditioned bus and were led over the sand dunes to the true desert. We were separated so that we could see no one else, we had the experience of being truly alone. There were no landmarks, no other people, animals or plants. There was a sense of lostness, because everything looked the same. It was easy to feel unease and a bit of uncertainty about our ability to find our way back to the bus. We had to trust that the guides knew where we were and would not leave us, but....there was a bit of insecurity about the whole business. There was absolutely nothing to see but sand, and so we began to look inward, to face our unease and learn for just a few moments to live in trust that we were not alone. That experience came back into my memory recently. It seems a bit like the wilderness of uncertainty which many feel about the future now. If we use it so, it can be a time of exploration and gift. It can be the time that we have been given to look inward into ourselves to find God waiting for us there. Like the woman of Samaria, in the Gospel, we are invited to come and see how this experience might be one of conversion and growth for our spiritual life. There are a lot of lemons in our lives right now and so it is time to make lemonade.

This morning we join the Israelites, in the wilderness. They have come from slavery in Egypt to freedom, but it is freedom with a cost. They have been promised a land of milk and honey, a land of freedom and abundance, but they are not yet arrived in the Promised Land. There are many things they lack, meat, bread and most importantly water. They cry out to Moses, wishing to return to the good old days in Egypt. They were slaves and worked hard but at least they knew what to expect and how to survive. I sympathize with Moses, for whom all of this is new as well. He didn't expect to be leading this band of people for 40 years. He obeyed the voice of God and look where it got him and them. Where it got Moses and the Israelites was the beginning of a long process of conversion. A long process of changing from a band of escaped slaves to a community. Moses, frustrated and frightened as he might have been, remains

faithful, trusting the God whom he follows trusting in God who is present, and who has not abandoned him. In answer to the cry of his people Moses does three things, things available to us in our situation as well. The first is that Moses prays. The prayer is not elegant but heartfelt. Moses prayer is brief, humble, and made in plain words. Moses is unsure, anxious and in need of hope. And hope is exactly what God provides, hope in a very real and tangible form. Moses is brought to see the tools he already had to deal with the lack of water. He had a miraculous staff. We have miraculous tools as well, we have ingenuity, common sense, creativity, intelligence and compassion, all tools given by God to solve our problems.

Moses is instructed to take the staff which he brought out of Egypt and in the presence of the elders to strike a rock. Out of the rock comes water that the people of Israel may drink and live. The need of the people was met with a miracle, water from a rock, surely an unlikely source even for God. It was water in the desert, water that was enough for the purpose, just enough. The water that came forth from the rock was not a lake, not a river, not enough to bathe in but only to drink. And once again, the people learned that God would fill their need. God was patient, gracious, merciful and providential using what was at hand, in an unusual way to provide. As I thought about the idea of miracle and water from the rock, I thought also of the gospel and the Samaritan woman. Water was critical in this story as well. Jesus was thirsty and he asked for a drink. He could not get the water by himself, as the well was deep and he had no bucket. The Samaritan woman appeared with all of the necessary tools, for collecting water. She had a bucket and a water jar and she was willing to use those tools to satisfy Jesus thirst. This too, was a miracle, using the common what we have to solve an immediate problem. She was willing to share not only her tools and the water but herself as well. In that willingness to share, her conversion took place. She began by questioning. Questioning, it has been said, tunes the soul. The woman went from questioning to belief. She did not understand, but she believed. The Greek word from which our word belief comes does not mean intellectual assent or understanding, but rather means that which one gives one's heart to. The Samaritan woman gave her heart to Jesus and in doing so participated in a miracle. A bucket and an earthen water jar were the means of conversion in this story. It reminds us that conversion, change, can be induced by the strangest things. God uses whatever we have to help us see a miracle. They are all around us, even as we live in the wilderness of this time.

Benedictine monasteries are noted for hospitality to travelers. The monasteries themselves are often located in rural or remote areas, where hospitality can mean the difference between life and death. The following is a story of such a monastery, the response of one monk and the way in which this may have been a conversion experience for one unsuspecting thief. It is told by Kathleen Norris in a book entitled *Amazing Grace*.

Story: "A monk I know, an old Montana hand, was once awoken in the middle of the night in his rural monastery by the sound of someone in his room—or rather, the furtive noises of someone pawing through his desk in the room adjacent to his small bedroom, apparently searching for money. The criminal mind,...is a marvelous invention. What genius would think to knock off a monastery, especially for the petty cash that might, or more likely, might not be in a monk's cell?

"Finding nothing, the burglar began to cross the threshold into the bedroom. But the monk was ready for him. He had been waiting wide-eyed, adjusting his eyes to the dark, a single-action six-shooter in hand. When the shadowy head appeared in the doorway, the monk

cocked the pistol—in the 2 a.m. silence of the monastery it must have sounded like canon fire—and he said, in his best gravelly voice, ‘I’ll give you the count of five to get the hell out of here. Then, I start shooting.’ The monk took a small breath and began: One...’ He heard a drunken ‘Holy expletive, and the sound of a rapid exit not only from his room but from the abbey itself. As the would-be thief fled into the night, the monk relieved his pistol from active duty and went back to sleep. Pulling a pistol on someone is not usually a generous {hospitable} act, but in the case of my Benedictine friend, it may have been not only that but a healing act as well. Who is to say that conversion did not take place in that very moment, in that monk’s cell. The startled Holy expletive may have been the only prayer that this hapless, would-be thief was capable of at the time, the sort of put-on-the-spot expletive that only God can hear as a prayer from the heart. Even in a holy place, a place of peace, the sound of a pistol being cocked and the voice of a monk angry at having been awoken for no good reason in the middle of the night, a person might hear the voice of God. For real. A voice might accost us, sharply, demanding that we change our ways, but which is also full of grace and promise, suggesting nothing less than the transformation of our very selves.”

The transformation, the conversion of our very selves. We are invited to come and see how this might be.