

As we approach the midpoint of Lent, we travel with the Israelites through the barren desert, and with Jesus and his disciples into the hostile land of Samaria. These readings help us get to know God, his wisdom, mercy, and Fatherly love.

In the reading from Exodus, the people are suffering, they've run out of water, and they're concerned about the wellbeing of their children and their livestock. The people respond to physical suffering with hostility. They don't turn to God; they instead complain to Moses, blaming him for leading them out into the desert. In retrospect, they should have known the immense power of God having seen His many miracles, especially the dramatic parting of the Red Sea that destroyed the Egyptian army. But their current situation, living in the middle of the desert without water, seemed impossible, and caused them to doubt.

It's like Jesus, when he is asleep in the front of the boat during the storm. The disciples say, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" None of the disciples expected him to wake up and calm the seas with his words. In the same way no one expected Moses to strike the rock and uncover enough water to satisfy the giant tribe. Yet, God made a covenant with his people and said, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." This promise is repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments, it represents an ultimate, deep, and personal bond between God and his people. God is perfect and unwavering in his commitment. Yet, as human beings, it seems to take a lifetime to fully understand and commit to this covenant.

In the case of the Israelites, they wanted water more than God, but God did not fail them, He gave them water at a time when God was their only hope. We need to compare this physical need for life-sustaining water, to the spiritual need for living water in our world today. Just like water in the desert, the spiritual water can only come from one place, from our God. And like Moses, God sent his only Son to dispense this water from Jesus Christ, our rock.

This takes us to the gospel reading where Jesus and his disciples are traveling through Samaria, a hostile place for Jews. Have you ever wondered where this hate for each other came from? A short history. They were political and territorial rivals, north vs south, a thousand years before Christ. When the brutal Assyrian empire conquered Israel's northern tribes, they brought in Pagen foreigners who intermarried with the remaining Israelites. Considered "half-breeds" by the southern Jews, they were regarded as impure and rejected for their religious practices. 500 years later, the Samaritans offered to help rebuild the temple in Jerusalem but were rejected by the Jews, so they built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. This temple was destroyed by a Jewish leader in 128 BC continuing the bitter hatred. Jews were so afraid of Samaritans, they often traveled in round about ways to avoid the country.

Despite this, Jesus insisted on going there. The previous line to this gospel says, "He had to pass through Samaria." The footnote says it was a "theological necessity" in other words, it was part of Christ's mission. Not only did they travel through Samaria, but they also went to Jacob's well, close to Mount Gerizim, the epicenter of Samaritan life.

Jesus arrives at noon and meets a woman who is rejected by her community and is forced to fetch water in the middle of the day. If the Samaritans are the black sheep of the tribes of Israel, this woman is the black sheep of the black sheep, yet Jesus chooses her as the rock his living water will flow through.

When Jesus breaks tradition and asks her to bring him water, she responds coldly saying, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" However, during their short conversation, she advances a LIFETIME in her faith. Initially, she sees Jesus as an ordinary Jewish man, much like someone new to the faith might see him, as simply a historical figure, a Jewish rabi. When Jesus offers her "Living water," she shows interest but, in the end, she clings to the idea of physical water, and reminds Him he has no bucket. Then Jesus reveals that He knows her life story, and she elevates him to the level of a prophet, a man from God. Like Moses, he is someone who might intercede on her behalf.

Next, she discusses her beliefs, how her ancestors worshiped and how she is waiting for the Messiah who, "Will proclaim all things to us." Finally, Jesus reveals to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." At this point, He fills her spiritual bucket to the brim with living water. She believes he may be the Messiah, abandons her physical bucket and water, and returns to the city to evangelize her community.

Isn't this the meaning of Lent? We abandon some of our physical vices in hopes of encountering Christ in the desert and bring home some of His living water. As the gospel says about physical water, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst." Lent takes us back to the story of Exodus and Jesus in the boat. No matter what our life throws at us, God is there, perfect and unwavering in his commitment. Jesus goes on to say, "The water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." This is where we aim to become like the woman at the well, alive in our faith, telling her neighbors, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Christ?" The amazing part is they came and welcomed Jesus and he stayed with them, despite a thousand years of tribal hostility.

The Lord's living water continues to be active, even at St. James. Today, members of our OCIA program are working their way through the scrutinies to prepare for acceptance and baptism into the Church. This year we are blessed with a big group, about the size of the 12 apostles. We are blessed to have them working with Neil and their sponsors to learn how to live our faith.

Lent is a time of struggle and insight, learning from the doubt of the Israelites in the desert and discerning our faith like the woman at the well. Let's think about what impossible circumstances we have in our lives and the reality of God's power to help us, to make us more like Moses, keeping the faith and following through on our commitment to be God's people.