

Sermon for Sunday, March 15, 2020 - "Waters of Compassion from Our Hearts"

Third Sunday in Lent
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Today's worship was livestreamed and available through radio broadcast only.

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

In our reading from Exodus today, the people of God were wandering in the wilderness uncertain and unafraid. They couldn't find water. They couldn't tell if God was with them or not. I'm guessing some were completely panicked and some thought others were overreacting just a bit.

We know something of what that is like. These days of a global health emergency are frightening and unsettling. And dear ones, it is OK to feel whatever you feel - afraid, isolated, overwhelmed, angry, ill-equipped, frustrated, all these things; it is OK to feel them all. We are not alone in all these feelings. We are not alone as we face this situation.

Today all of our assigned scripture readings give us stories of communities and people who have experienced things similar to what we're facing today - communities and people that have known disruption, fear, suffering and social isolation. In these stories we see that God's people have been in times like these before and that in these times, God is so very close, so very present. Our Gospel reading shows us that God, in Jesus, was present to the Samaritan woman at the well in the midst of her social isolation. Our Romans passage assures us that God is present in suffering, that God pours love into our hearts so that we might endure. And our reading from Exodus shows us that God was present to the Hebrew people even when they felt so very alone in the wilderness. The people had endured intense hardship in Egypt. God had delivered them, but then they found themselves journeying in the desert with no water. They got really worried, to say the least.

They forgot that God had led them out of Egypt and that God was leading them through the wilderness. They panicked and quarreled and tested God. They asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Yes, came the resounding answer, yes. God was with them. God is with us. God said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in

front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”

The people could only see the rocks, they could only see cold, lifeless stones all around them. On their own, they could not see that water does in fact course through rock formations. They needed God to help access the water that was already there. They needed God to unleash the gifts within God’s good creation.

In our current wilderness time with COVID-19, fear will try to turn our hearts to hard, cold, lifeless stone. Fear will try to tell us to panic and hoard supplies. *And* our sin, our human tendency to curve in on ourselves, will try to keep us fixated on ourselves and how this all impacts us.

Yet beloved people of God, there are deep waters of compassion and kindness coursing within each of our hearts. We have been baptized into Christ, who is living water for the world. As our reading from Romans today reminds us, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” [in baptism]. And God is present with us even now to unleash this living water from within our hearts. And oh, dear ones, we need the waters of compassion and kindness to flow from our hearts now more than ever. The world needs us to rise to this occasion and bring forth the love of God for the sake of the world that God so loves.

Psychologist Gretchen Schmelzer has written a powerful article entitled “This Can Be Our Finest Hour -- But We Need All of You.”¹ I’m going to read most of her article now as it is such an important word.

She writes: “For the vast majority of people nationwide and worldwide, this virus is not about you. This is one of those times in life, in history, when your actions are about something bigger. They are about someone else. They are about something greater, a greater good that you may not ever witness. A person you will save whom you will never meet.

You may be healthy, and your kids may be healthy. You parents may be healthy. Everyone around you seems fine. And all the things you planned and the 2020 spring you thought you were going to have has been completely undone ... It all seems fast, and out-of-proportion and disorienting. You look at each action and think—but it would be okay if I did that. It’s not so big. We worked so hard. They would be so disappointed.

Your losses are real. Your disappointments are real. Your hardships are real. I don’t mean to make light or to minimize the difficulty ahead for you, your family or community. But this isn’t like other illnesses and we don’t get to act like it is. It’s more contagious, it’s more fatal—and most importantly, even if it can be managed, it can’t be managed at a massive scale—anywhere.

¹ <http://gretchenschmelzer.com/blog-1/2020/3/10/can-we-make-this-our-finest-hour>

We need this thing to move slowly enough for our collective national and worldwide medical systems to hold the very ill so that all of the very ill can get care. Because at this time of severe virus there are also all of the other things that require care. There is still cancer, heart attacks, car accidents, complicated births. And we need our medical systems to be able to hold us. And we need to be responsible because our medical systems are made up of people and these amazing healthcare workers are a precious and limited resource. They will rise to this occasion. They will work to help you heal. They will work to save your mother or father or sister or baby. But in order for that to happen we have very important work to do. ALL OF US.

So, what is our work? Yes, you need to wash your hands and stay home if you are sick. But the biggest work you can do is expand your heart and your mind to see yourself, your family as part of a much bigger community that can have a massive—hugely massive—impact on the lives of other people ... You can help by canceling anything that requires a group gathering. You can help by not using the medical system unless it is urgent. You can help by staying home if you are sick ... by cooking or shopping or doing errands for a friend who needs to stay home ... by watching someone's kid if they need to cover for someone else at work ... You can help by seeing yourself as part of something bigger than yourself.” From Pastor Amy: I would add, too, that you can join in public policy advocacy for the most vulnerable and for our communities. The ELCA Advocacy Network has issued an alert that we'll share on our website and Facebook page.

Gretchn Schmelzer continues ...

When the Apollo 13 oxygen tank failed and the lunar module was in danger of not returning to earth, Gene Kranz, the lead flight director overheard people saying that this could be the worst disaster NASA had ever experienced—to which he is rumored to have responded, “With all due respect, I believe this is going to be our finest hour.”

Imagine if we could make our response to this crisis our finest hour. Imagine if a year or two from now we looked back on this and told the stories of how we came together as a team in our community, in our state, in our nation and across the world. Your contribution to the finest hour may seem small, invisible, inconsequential—but every small act of ‘not doing’ what you were going to do, and ‘doing’ an act of kindness or support [or advocacy] will add up exponentially. These acts can and will save lives. The Apollo 13 crew made it their finest hour by letting go of the word “I” and embracing the word “we.” And that’s the task required of us. It can only be our finest hour if we work together. You are all on the team. And we need all of you to shine in whatever way you can.”

Beloved of God, we often wonder if we can shine the way the world needs. Our hearts often feel like hard, cold, lifeless stone. But there are waters of kindness and compassion coursing within our hearts. God is present with us to unleash those waters, to let healing help flow for us and through us for the sake of the world.

As Romans assures us: With the presence of God, we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not

disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.