

First Impressions THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (A)
Exodus 17: 3-7 Psalm 95 Romans 5: 1-2,5-8 John 4: 5-42
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The generations before us were a traveling folk. Except for Native Americans, we all came from other places to be here. (It is believed that even Native Americans arrived here during the Ice Age, 20-30,000 years ago.) The number of vowels in my last name gives evidence to my ancestral origins. The “old folks,” so they seemed through my boyhood eyes, left the poverty of southern Italy for America—the “Land of Promise.” And, despite the poverty and prejudice my grandparents’ generation endured, their sacrifices bore fruit for their children. Here we are, a couple generations later, educated, employed, well fed (perhaps too well fed!) and settled in “our country.”

Even as a boy I could tell that my immigrant grandparents, uncles and aunts, as settled as they seemed, still had a nostalgia for the “old country.” Even though they had arrived a long time ago, they still hadn’t fully arrived. They didn’t speak their new language well, the customs were strange, the food unfamiliar and they told stories of being misunderstood. At Ellis Island, where they arrived, the other immigrants from Europe and Asia thought the new wave of immigrants from Italy ate worms. They had never seen spaghetti before! The trip from the old place to the new was hard on all those immigrants, as it is for the most recent arrivals to this country.

The Israelites were also a traveling people, and we can tell from today’s first reading that they had a harder trip to make. They had left slavery behind, but their arrival to the next place, the Promise Land, was long delayed and the trip to get there was arduous and tempted their faith. They were forty years in the desert. They didn’t like what they left but, as the reading from Exodus shows, at this point of their travels they were very discouraged. Each day was a struggle and the present moment looked impossible. They were thirsty and they were beginning to doubt Moses and their God. Where was God in this hard place? The name of the place summarized this moment of their journey: Massah means “Proof”; Meribah means “Contention.” That’s how hard the place was! The trip was too long, with too many camping grounds and too many frustrations and failures. Was God with them? Judging from their condition, it didn’t seem so to the Israelites.

We can identify with the people wandering in the desert, for we too have known similar moments on our journeys. There have times when we have lamented,

“How long must I endure this?” “When will it end?” “Can I/we make it?” We know what we have left behind and we are not sure what lies ahead. Will it be worth the struggle? We have known the hard places; we have known the rock at Horeb.

We can understand the temptation the Israelites had to return to the old places and the old ways. We have dreams we want to see come to fruition for ourselves and or family, yet at the rock, the hard place, those dreams feel flimsy. So, for example: We would rather go back to silence and getting along, than to more open communication and the pain that may cause. We would rather stay in a relationship that is not working, than risk a break and go forward to new, uncharted territory. We would rather stay with an abusive spouse, than choose the scary terrain of independence. We would rather continue old habits and dependencies than go through the sacrifice change requires.

Lent urges us to shift to a traveling mode. Lent invites us to set out; to say to ourselves, “I have got to change, I have got to make this journey.” We are being invited to leave behind what is not working and not good for us and go to a place up ahead. Like the Israelites, we start out making the changes we must, but the road is long, uncertain and sometimes very hard to stick to, so our resolution dissolves and we look back to where we used to be and turn around.

The experience of the Israelites in the desert reminds us how much we need God---day by day. Today’s Exodus story reveals that at the very hard place, at the rock of Horeb, God will provide the refreshment we need. God tells Moses to strike the rock with his staff. From the rock water to quench the people’s thirst flows. Is the same possible for us? That from the very hard places of struggle and temptation God can draw water for us and refresh us? How? By the steady hand of a friend; the presence of one with us by the bedside of a loved one; in the support group that encourages and challenges us to stay with the program so we can break an addiction or destructive habit; the voice of confrontation from a loved one, who encourages us to be better than we have been. The initial experience has the sound and feel of the rock; but then, through God and God’s instruments, we discover that we are at the rock at Horeb and God has made living water flow to quench the thirst only God can quench. The Israelites, we are told, quarreled and tested God at the hard place and asked, “Is the Lord in our midst or not?” To their surprise, they found that God was.

The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman is a familiar one—perhaps too familiar. It is an important story for John, and he spends a lot of time

narrating the exchange between the two. (There's a shorter option in the Lectionary, but why violate the storyteller's intent by reading a chopped-up version? For the sake of brevity will we sacrifice the dramatic development in the account? I plan on inviting the congregation to sit down and listen to a good tale.) Because the story is so familiar I find myself leaning heavily on John P. Pilch's input for new insights (Cf. Below).

Pilch notes some "irregularities" in the story. He says the Mediterranean world is divided according to gender: women have their places in the home and kitchen; men have theirs in the fields, market place and the gate. The well is common to both, but women and men go there at different times of the day. Women go in the morning and evening. The Samaritan woman is there at noon—something is wrong. Is she avoiding the other women of the town? Does she have a "reputation" and is shunned by them? She is at a well, at noon and she is alone, speaking to a strange man in a public place.

The conversation between Jesus and the woman raises even the suspicions of Jesus' disciples. When it is over she goes to another public place to tell those gathered there (men at the market?) about her conversation with Jesus. Pilch notes the subversions that are occurring in the story. John is giving new roles to women in his community. He fashions the conversation between Jesus and the woman in a seven-part dialogue; each speaks seven times. Is a new creation story being told in this seeming unimportant moment and place? Just as God created light on the first day, so Jesus leads the woman out of her darkness into light, to a deeper understanding of his identity. Did you notice the growth in the woman's awareness of Jesus, revealed in the names she gives him? She begins by calling him "a Jew," then moves to "prophet," then, she tells the town people, "Could he possibly be the Christ?" Later they call him "the savior of the world."

The woman gets more time in this story than anyone else in John's gospel. She grows rapidly in her insight about Jesus, and he commissions her to go call her husband and return. She announces Jesus' presence to the people of the town and is, therefore, the first disciple in John's gospel.

In our first reading the people grumble against Moses in the desert. They are thirsty and demand water. Under God's direction Moses strikes the rock and water flows. In the gospel Jesus, the new Israel, is thirsty and stops at a well in Samaria. There he receives a good reception, first from the woman, then from the townspeople. Jesus finds rejection among his own; among Samaritans, he is welcomed. He reflects God's thirst for people, willingness to go outside the usual

religious and social boundaries, and God's desire to give life giving water to anyone thirsty enough to seek it. The woman in today's story has no name. Perhaps she represents all of us, regardless of race, gender or nationality, who acknowledge our thirst for more than we can provide for ourselves.

The entire exchange between the woman and Jesus is characterized by respect, openness, even mutual challenge. But there is an underlaying current throughout the story----Jesus' compassion. He accepts the woman as she is. She, on her part, reveals an honest probing into Jesus' identity; more than we find among Jesus' disciples. Two strangers meet at an unusual place, and their honest dialogue brings one to a deeper knowledge of herself and the offer of a new and deeper life.

Is it possible then that, when we meet a stranger and are willing to put aside all the political, social, ethnic and religious barriers that normally separate people, and enter into open dialogue, that we too might come to the life-giving experience the woman had and discover God in the stranger?

REMINDER:

Fr. Chuck Dahm, OP has written short homilies for the Sundays of Lent. They have a social justice cast, with an emphasis on immigration and each homily has an accompanying Prayer of the Faithful. Go to our "Preachers' Exchange" webpage and click on Justice Preaching. Or go directly to:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com/justicepreaching.htm>

QUOTABLE

A popular proverb says: "Familiarity breeds contempt." In the case of Bible stories, familiarity blunts sensitivity and often blocks proper understanding. Anyone familiar with Mediterranean culture immediately identifies shocking and jarring elements in this story.

----John J. Pilch, commenting on today's gospel story in: THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS: SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, CYCLE A. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995. Page 54, paper, \$11.95 ISBN 0814622860.

JUSTICE NOTES

"In those days, in their thirst for water, the people grumbled...?"

(Exodus 17:3)

"A woman of Samaria came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink".

(John 4:7)

"We believe that water not only is a consumer good, but a good to which all human beings have a right, even if they don't have money." *(Pope John Paul II)*

“The Bible opens precisely with the image of the divine spirit hovering over the water at the creation of the universe. The management of water and sanitation must address the needs of all, and particularly of persons living in poverty. Inadequate access to safe drinking water affects the wellbeing of over one billion persons and is the cause of disease, unnecessary suffering, conflicts, poverty and even death.” – *(A Contribution of the Delegation of the Holy See on the Occasion of the Third World Water Forum (Kyoto, March 2003) by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.)*

Many, many of our brothers and sisters around the world are begging, “give me a drink”. More than 2.6 billion people – forty per cent of the world’s population – lack basic sanitation facilities, and over one billion people still use unsafe drinking water sources. As a result, thousands of children die every day from diarrhea and other water-, sanitation- and hygiene-related diseases and many more suffer and are weakened by illness.

Children – and particularly girls – are denied their right to education because they are busy fetching water or are deterred by the lack of separate and decent sanitation facilities in schools. Women are forced to spend large parts of their day fetching water. Without safe water and sanitation, sustainable development is impossible.

Did you know?

- One out of every six people worldwide lacks access to safe drinking water, while the average American uses **100 gallons** of water every day.

1. The richest fifth of the world's people (that's us) consumes 86 percent of all goods and services, while the poorest fifth consumes just 1.3 percent.

- **Two million people - most of them children - die each year from waterborne disease.**

What I can do:

- Let this time of concern for water, caused by the extreme drought in North Carolina (and other places in our country) make you more aware of those around the world who have no clean water at all.

- **Pray for those who have no clean water and *lobby against the movement to "privatize" water* in the developing world. Thank God for our abundance when you turn on your faucet.**

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

George E. Goode #0149506 (On death row since 11/2093)

Martin A. Richardson #0343075 (11/22/93)

Randy L. Atkins #0012311 (12/8/93)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"**

"Liturgical year A," which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

"Liturgical years, A, B and C," reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process.

Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or go to our webpage to make an online donation:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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