

FIRST LESSON: Exodus 17:1-7

SECOND LESSON: Romans 5:1-11

March 22, 2020

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

*During the global Coronavirus outbreak—delivered online*

### ***“Bitter or Better?”***

There are times and seasons in life that are more challenging than others. We're there. Or rather, we're at the beginning of "there." We have food. We have shelter. Our homes are not bombed out. A tsunami, hurricane or tornado has not obliterated everything we hold dear and every landmark we know. We are facing a different challenge, a silent contagious killer, and the fear that comes with it. We need to remember at this time more than ever that God is still God, and we are still God's children.

When the whole Israelite community set out under the leadership of Moses they were leaving an unjust and oppressive situation. But they very quickly forgot that in light of a new crisis—there was no water. People can't survive without water, so they came to Moses and demanded to know, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord provided water. God knew that the people would need water. That wasn't the issue here. The issue was how quickly there was a complete meltdown of trust and outpouring of frustration and anger. And if we're honest, most of us know that at one point or another in our lives this has been us, and could be us again.

Being a Christian does not protect us from life or from death, even if some of the more saccharine hymns and praise songs make it appear that way. Paul was well aware of this, and it's why he talked about the hard times in the section of scripture we read this morning. Paul viewed all hardship and trial as opportunities for growth. It is suffering itself that can transform us spiritually. But this is not automatic. People can suffer and gain nothing from it. The same experience that makes one person wise and strong can completely destroy another. How we respond to the events in our lives is what makes the difference. When Paul says that we can rejoice in our sufferings, I don't believe he was in denial. Suffering still hurts. Paul had hope because of what hard times can produce in our character. Suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance produces character, character gives us hope, and our hope is not based on an illusion. God's Spirit pours love into our hearts so that we can receive the strength of God and grow closer to God.

Struggle is like spiritual boot camp. We don't enlist soldiers one week and send them into battle the next. There is a lot of training, a lot of grueling drill and repetition. Muscles need to develop, and reactions must become swift

and automatic. Trust in the leaders must be fine-tuned so that orders will be obeyed immediately or lives could be lost. And the more important the mission is, the greater the training. A brand-new recruit is no match for an experienced and seasoned veteran.

We all want to skip the hard parts. We don't like the hard parts. But God takes the hard parts and uses them for our good, to make us strong and capable. Of all the things that have happened in my life, it's the pain that has brought the most growth. I don't like it. I wouldn't want to go back and repeat any of it. But I have to acknowledge that it is true. Psychologists have even begun to recognize this phenomenon in some people. They call it "post-traumatic growth." But it only happens when we look at things from a higher perspective than our own. Many people discover skills and abilities they never knew they had. I would never be before you now if my husband had not been unfaithful, bringing my marriage to an end. I had no idea I was capable of preaching a sermon, much less pastoring a congregation. If you had told me then that I would be doing this now I would not have believed you. Those who have faced life threatening illnesses or danger and survived, experience life in a whole new way. And when we ourselves have known weakness and pain we become more compassionate and sensitive to those around us. Even, and often especially when these traumatic experiences result in what we call the "dark night of the soul" when God appears wholly absent, we are transformed when we come out the other side.

Unfortunately for us spiritual growth isn't automatic. We are quite capable of forgetting to pray and trying to do everything in our own strength. We can ignore God, become bitter and complain a lot. The choice is ours. Bitter—or better. The difference is in the letter "I". If **I** am at the center of everything and **I** am the only one who matters and **I** have to do everything then **I** will soon find myself overwhelmed and sink. But the second part of our reading today concerns something that Christians either totally ignore or gleefully proclaim—God's wrath. Where do "**I**" fit in with that? Paul writes: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

I haven't heard it yet, but sooner or later some genius is going to proclaim that the Coronavirus is an expression of God's wrath against humanity. The crime for which we are being punished will vary. The extreme fundamentalist Muslims will say it's because of us infidels. The extreme fundamentalist Christians will blame gays or feminism or abortion or socialism or communism or something I haven't thought of yet. Regardless of the alleged crime, the only remedy will be a strict adherence to their oppressive version of true faith. This is what fear does. The Early Church Father Tertullian once commented, "If the Tiber rises, if the Nile does not rise, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, famine, or pestilence, straightway the cry is 'The

Christians to the lion!” (Apologeticus 40) When people are afraid they look for someone to blame. It makes them feel in control.

Paul says we are “saved from God’s wrath” through Christ. Does that mean that God is permanently furious with us? If we take Paul in isolation it might appear so. If we look at the whole of scripture, however, God’s anger seems reserved for very specific circumstances. While we know that none of us are perfect there are certain things that make God, and by extension Jesus, absolutely furious. This is not anger like human anger, however. God is not some raging and out of control being throwing viruses at us. Nonetheless, there are things that God hates.

God hates injustice. Corrupting the courts through bribery and favoritism, having one standard for the rich and powerful and another for the rest—these are things God hates.

God hates economic exploitation. The prophets and the words of Jesus make this clear. Robbing widows and orphans, exploiting the vulnerable, filling the pockets of the rich and emptying the pockets of the poor—these are things God hates.

God hates hypocrisy. Those who profess that they are religious and virtuous but who judge others harshly for things they themselves are guilty of—these are things that the prophets and Jesus hate and condemn.

God hates the hostile rejection of the foreigner and the refugee. The people of Israel were once foreigners and refugees. We are commanded to be hospitable to those in need. It’s not an option. God hates any policy that puts children in cages, separates children from parents and sends people back to their deaths. We cannot allow party loyalty to blind ourselves to the fact that this is something God hates.

God hates hardness of hearts, the type of brutal self-centeredness that does not care if people suffer or die as long as they are not my family, my friends, my race, my economic level or my nation.

And what does God love? God loves mercy, justice, truth, compassion and love. Christ died for humanity because we as a whole society have done that which is wrong. We have put ourselves on the wrong side becoming God’s enemies. But we can change sides. That is what true faith does. It wakes us up to see what is really going on in the world and enables us to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. There is a power that is at war with God, and that power is called sin. Sin puts self first and is willing to throw everyone else under the bus. But we can refuse to obey sin when we belong to God. We can seek God first and serve those in need who surround us.

These are challenging times. They are frightening times. And we will feel the pressure of fear and be tempted to think only of ourselves and our loved ones. But we can also refuse to give in to fear and stand strong in our faith. Every challenge is an opportunity to grow, and we will have a lot of opportunities for spiritual growth in the months ahead. Amen.

Exodus 17:1-7

**17** The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. **2** So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?"

**3** But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"

**4** Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."

**5** The Lord answered Moses, "Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. **6** I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. **7** And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Romans 5:1-11

**5** Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. **3** Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; **4** perseverance, character; and character, hope. **5** And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

**6** You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. **7** Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. **8** But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

**9** Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! **10** For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! **11** Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.