

**WILDERNESS FAITH; EXODUS 17:1-7; LENT III, MARCH 15, 2020;
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News of the coronavirus was, at first, like a thunderstorm I remember experiencing as a child at Lake Chautauqua; it gathered on the horizon – distant, though discernable but not overly concerning. We knew it was coming from the weather reports. But we were too busy with summer vacation to pay much attention.

Then the storm announced itself in a stiff, cold wind. Dead leaves blew across the yard. The sky grew thick and dark with clouds. Hail started pelting everything: hammock, cars, cottages and the lake that looked like it had goosebumps between the white caps. Thunder split open the sky, culminating in a deafening explosion; lightening arched higher than a hundred Empire State Buildings.

It seems an apt metaphor for the onset of the coronavirus gathering speed, spreading fast and far, leaving little time to relearn how to wash our hands, practice something called social distancing and get to the store in time to restock our shelves before the outbreak.

Storms and viruses have a way of revealing how vulnerable we are; exposed to danger despite our technical prowess and economic/military strength. Now, we find ourselves in a wilderness – a medieval term defined by Webster as uninhabitable, inhospitable, and not fit for humans.

Wildernesses are not just literal landscapes like today's story in Exodus. They are just as real when we find ourselves in hostile, unfamiliar surroundings; ill equipped, lacking what we need to survive – like a pandemic.

Plus pandemics are great levelers. Economic and social rank are erased by a disease that respects no boundary or authority; nor privileges liberal or conservative. Anyone from prime ministers to the poor can suffer.

David Brooks in a somewhat pessimistic article Friday said that as much as other disasters bring out the best in people, pandemics tend to bring out the worst. When disease starts to spread, he said, the historic record from the Black Plague through the Spanish Flu of 1918 is not so kind to human moral character. We tend to look out for ourselves and sometimes, unbelievably, leave children to fend on their own.

We would do well to take stock in this pandemic before it arrives full force and consider what values we want to guide us through the challenging days ahead. I am reminded of 9-11, knowing before it started that violence against Muslims would take place and intentionally holding an interfaith service in this sanctuary on 9-13 then building interfaith bridges before fear could drive us apart.

We already know coronavirus is here in every state but West Virginia despite the President's closing the borders. New York is third, Erie County officially announced yesterday our first three cases. The rate of spread is exponential; galloping through populations; the World Health Organization reports that fatality rates range according to age from less than 1% for people under 20 to 15-20% for our oldest citizens. In a nation of 350 million the numbers who will die is staggering. But our secret weapon hiding in plain sight is our interdependence. CNN health expert Dr. Sanjay Gupta reminds us our protection from the disease depends upon our mutual practice of good handwashing and social-distancing. You take care of me when you wash your hands, I take care of you when I wash mine.

Like God's people in Exodus we are in a wilderness. More than searing heat, scrub brush and reptiles a spiritual wilderness is defined by the hardest choice we will ever make – where do we *finally* place our trust when the chips are down and our back against the wall? This is the timeless *and timely* value of today's story when God's people ran out of water and they feared for their lives.

Tests like this come frequently in the Bible: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are tested. The prophets are tested. Jesus before his ministry even starts is tested when the Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness where Satan tempts him three times; each time to do something not nefarious or evil but something good with one quid pro quo: that Jesus shift his ultimate trust and allegiance from God to Satan.

In today's episode Moses names the place Meribah and Massah translated, "Place of Testing and Quarreling" marking what happens here: the people run out of water and are put to the test, yet they, in turn, put God to the test. Israel wants guarantees. She issues a demanding, defiant question "Is the Lord among us or not?" This harsh insistence demands that God produce for Israel. If God produces, God is among us. If God does not produce, God is absent. God becomes a means not an end, an appendage to Israel's sense of self not the center of her identity and reality. Israel abdicates her faith by telling God what to do; reducing God to an idol.

In a system that exists only for production and consumption whether Israel's ancient bargaining economy or our modern consumer society the role of God as means to get what we want is all that counts. But God does not succumb to the fears of the people; God retains the initiative and does not exist for, or at the summons of Israel, or us.

Lent is the season when we make intentional choices to leave the guarantees of the secular idols we worship – hard work, physical fitness, practicing good citizenship for which we demand and expect long lives, comfortable homes, and financial security. We are immersed in the dominant social ordering of a high tech, affluent society; but Lent calls us just like the wilderness called Israel and calls us today with a pandemic to set aside our deal-making with God and not just remember but come to terms with his commands and promises.

Compared to the promises of social and economic class that claim and shape our lives and demand our ultimate allegiance, God's way in the world is lean and precarious. It is so much easier and fair we rationalize to challenge God *to come to our terms*, than submit our lives and values to God's. Yet, God's response in today's story leading Moses to water is a terse command, a lean promise and life at the last minute. Israel is led to trust miracles the empire then and secular world today judge impossible.

When Lent is defined not just as a liturgical season but a pandemic who we are as people of faith is put to the test in a manner it never is when things are going our way.

I heard a man of means from another city say he would rather contract the coronavirus than go broke to which a Jewish mutual friend of ours responded, "When it's our time nothing will help us, when it's not nothing will hurt us."

That's faith that has come to terms with God's commands and promises.

Which sounds reminiscent of Jesus today: "Do not worry about your life...look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor store in barns, yet God feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his span of life?"

At the end of the day, it's about what and who we trust. The Israelites were trying to make a deal with God – we'll give you this if you give us that. Give us water and manna God and we will be your faithful people. But the God of Israel is not a deal-making God. The God of Israel demands our allegiance free of our quid pro quo offers and expectations.

Do we give our allegiance to a system we can manipulate and influence or do we give our allegiance to God to whom we bow in service and purpose? When the coronavirus spreads and starts taking lives in this community, when our own loved ones and friends are affected where will we turn for help. I am not referring to medical help. I am referring to spiritual help in a mental/emotional wasteland hostile to human life.

It's a tough call, the hardest choice we'll ever face. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. It's why there is so much testing going on in the Bible; we are hard-headed and resistant Jesus said. But there is also that constant refrain throughout Scripture from God, from the angels and from Jesus – “do not be afraid.” The enemy who reminds us of scarcity and danger, who wants to prevent our choosing God as our ultimate security is fear. Fear makes us deaf and blind to the commands and promises of God. Fear makes God optional; fear makes God's promises flimsy and inadequate to the present crisis. Fear assures us the rational thing, the smart thing is to retain control and negotiate with God for what we need when the chips are down and all else has failed.

But dealing with a pandemic is more than being tested and fighting off fear. The secret weapon hiding in plain sight as I said earlier is our interdependence upon one another – breaking out of a bunker mentality, that according to David Brooks pandemics would force us into; then reaching out to help and serve our neighbor.

Christianity Today ran a piece about what Martin Luther the great Reformer said during the Black Plague. He said as followers of Jesus we are called to care for the poor, the sick and the lonely. Do not run from your home or neighborhood to escape danger he urged the residents of Wittenburg, but stay and bring the comfort and hope of the gospel to those in need in our city. Luther's advice counters exactly the 'look out for number one' ethic David Brooks said is typical of people living in the time of a pandemic.

I am always struck with the relevance of the selected readings for the day. Who knew the story of Israel's running out of water in the desert would provide guidance and hope for the church on March 15, 2020 when word of a pandemic was just being announced.

It's more than being tested and fighting off fear. Surviving this pandemic is all about taking care of each other; being vigilant about washing our hands and adhering to health department restrictions, practicing social distancing, mobilizing ourselves as a congregation and staff online and on the telephone inviting friends and neighbors to come aboard and join us as we weather this crisis.

All we have to do to survive the coronavirus is to be the church—loving and serving God and our neighbor as ourselves. And when the high tide of anxiety and fear, of worry and despair rises and we or someone we know feels overwhelmed, then turn to our friends and neighbors at Westminster and trust God.

Like the crowd at the Sermon on the Mount who thought they were out of food until they opened their hearts and picnic baskets to one another, we already have everything we need to deal with this virus. Amen.