[As our Adult Forum is unable to meet on Sunday mornings, here is the handout we would have used, expanded to include some of my teaching notes (rewritten into logical sentence form!), a few other interesting quotes, and questions for reflection. Due to the timing, each week’s pdf will relate to the preceding Sunday’s lectionary readings. – Steve]

St. John’s Adult Forum, Lent 3 (March 15)

Exodus 17:1-7

1From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" 3But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" 4So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5The LORD 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. 6I 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." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

In the Hebrew bible, the story of the exodus reiterates the faithfulness of God even when the people prove less than faithful in their actions and attitudes, and was often related by ancient and medieval Christian writers to the journey of faith we talked about last week. The wanderings in the desert were used to illustrate the challenges of that journey—as Gregory of Nyssa puts it, when “life removed from the pleasures of the world seems at first difficult and disagreeable”—and those times of spiritual dryness when joy is absent and one is left trudging along, perhaps wondering what is happening and questioning if there is a point. Thus the great English Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx (1109-1167, commemorated January 12 on the Episcopal calendar) writes:

When you have given up the fleshpots of Egypt, the cares of this world, its ambitions and dissensions, do not be surprised if you do not immediately receive God’s manna from heaven. . . . You have withdrawn from the tumult of this world. Do not therefore murmur against God if you do not immediately experience the sweetness of God’s love. (The Mirror of Charity 2.14)

It’s easy to think of times of spiritual dryness and a lack of joy as a negative thing, or a sign that something is wrong—and they could be! But Aelred and other wise guides remind us they may also be the means by which God is calling and inviting us to move beyond the initial stages of the spiritual journey. Lent can serve as a time of purification, and that might include purifying any addiction we may have to “consolations”: that is, to always craving the emotional reassurances of spiritual infancy instead of the solid food of Christian maturity. “When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways,” writes the Apostle Paul
(1 Corinthians 13:11); and there is certainly a danger in remaining at the childish level in our formation, always wanting to feel good. Choosing to stay at that point may be to stop short, and not continue our journey of spiritual formation.

The water from the rock (verse 6) suggests ongoing divine care for the people as they journey, in spite of their feelings to the contrary. As we journey through our own deserts, we must trust in the divinely-given strength needed for that journey, however we may feel at any particular moment. The gushing water from the rock that gave the Hebrew people what they needed has traditionally been connected with Christ, the source of the spring of living water that satisfies spiritual thirsting and “gushes up to eternal life” in this morning’s gospel reading.

**QUESTIONS:** In the above passage, the Hebrew people may have had reason to complain, but they also hadn’t yet learned to trust God fully. What spiritual lessons are you still learning? What places and times in your life are those in which you struggle and wonder whether God is with you or active in the situation? Are there any addictions to “consolations” in your spiritual life that could be purified this Lent? [Partly adapted from *Christ is for Us* p.52, q. 2.]

**Romans 5:1-11**

1Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and 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. 6For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. 9Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 10For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The passive phrase “We are justified” stresses that it is ultimately the work of the faithful One to whom our obedient faithfulness is a response. The remainder of this passage indicates the results of this blessing: peace with God and access to grace (both of which are specified as being “through Christ”); hope that doesn’t disappoint; shared divine glory; positives such as endurance and character resulting even from challenges and suffering; love (which Paul elsewhere calls the greatest gift of all); the gift of the Holy Spirit; and being reconciled and saved. (These latter two are again passive: we don’t reconcile ourselves to God and save ourselves; God reconciles us and saves us through Christ).

The Old Testament wisdom literature says boasting in oneself is the mark of a fool; but here Paul presents boasting as good when it is in God and what God has done. Ours is good
news, worth rejoicing about and proclaiming because it makes a profound difference, as is shown when Paul turns in verses 3-5 to suffering as a basis for this “boasting.” The letter of James says the same thing regarding rejoicing in suffering (1:2-4), and—as we also saw in relation to Julian of Norwich last week—these were people who knew what it was like to suffer and to live in a suffering world.

Paul’s point is not that suffering is itself wonderful; rather, rejoicing is because of what was previously described (see verse 2): the grace in which we stand and the hope of sharing the glory of God. Although life is at times quite difficult, that strength and hope (like the water in the desert in the Old Testament reading) can help one to stand firm and perhaps even to grow from challenges, as the fourth-century theologian Basil of Caesarea says:

For those who are well prepared, tribulations are like certain foods and exercises for athletes which lead the contestant on to the inheritance of glory. (Homily 16).

To increase strength requires challenge and resistance: weightlifting, for example, must be of weights that aren’t easy to lift! But Paul stresses that God is “on our side,” as is shown in what Christ did for us (verses 6-11). 1 John 4:18 says God’s love casts out fear; and here, while not in any way suggesting things are easy—he knew they weren’t—Paul in a sense is saying that divine love can replace fear with hope, not just for tomorrow, but with significance for the many challenges of today as well.

QUESTION: How does hope change how you deal with challenges? How difficult is it to be a person of hope in the midst of the complexities of life? Verse 10 mentions “being saved by [Christ’s] life,” and Paul elsewhere can tell us, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). What does it mean to have Christ living in you? How does that change things?

John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." 16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had
five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"

Jesus’ openness here (initiating a conversation with a woman from a group considered heretical and to be avoided—compare the disciples’ reaction in verse 27) fits in with our discussion of inclusivity in last week’s Romans passage and its lessons for us. Notice too that Jesus keeps talking with the Samaritan woman even though she misunderstands him (verse 11, possibly 14 as well) and perhaps even scoffs at him (11-12), and that he avoids a digressive discussion of the differences between Jewish and Samaritan theology in favor of focusing on what matters (verses 20-24).

QUESTIONS: Why do you think the gospels often show Jesus “putting up” with people’s misunderstandings of him and what he is doing, rather than giving up on them? Why is that helpful for us to notice? How easy do you find it to be true to your own identity and embody your own uniqueness while still finding common ground with others?

Jesus’ reference to his gift of “living water” (verses 10, 13-14) would likely remind those reading John’s gospel of his words to Nicodemus in the preceding passage (read last week) concerning being born “of water and the Spirit.” They inspire the Samaritan woman’s desire, even if it may be somewhat literalistic (verse 15).

QUESTIONS: How do these images of living water and an internal spring of water speak to you, and how might they relate to Paul’s “Christ living in me” quote noted above? What is their significance for you as you live out your faith in the day-to-day life of this world? What practices help you to receive what you need from that “water from the rock” (Exodus 17:6)?

[The passage continues] Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then
comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. 36 The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Jesus in the central section of this passage encourages the disciples (and by extension us) to fulfill their callings and bring in those “ripe for harvest.” If he is to some degree directly referring to the Samaritan townspeople who are approaching (verse 30), this would again be a reminder of his call to welcome those who differ from ourselves, and create an inclusive community. In verse 38 Jesus uses what was actually a negative saying, “one sows and another reaps,” but applies it positively to suggest that some plant the seeds while others reap the harvest, but all are doing the necessary work that is the will, and ultimately the work, of God. This recognition can help us avoid what Soren Kierkegaard called “egocentric service of the good”—that is, imagining that ministry, service, etc., should happen our way, in our time, and with the results we want (then getting mad if things happen differently)! A better approach of obedient responsiveness is suggested by the eighteenth-century Quaker writer Lydia Rawlins Lancaster:

For as we steadily walk, in pure and perfect obedience with the light of life in ourselves, we shall see and know our places and times, neither to fall too far behind nor go too fast before our safe guide, but take heed to keep pace daily with the motions and discoveries thereof, not choosing our own way, but submitting our wills entirely to our guide’s.

Notice that the gospel passage presents the Samaritan woman as the example of what Jesus would like the disciples to do: reaping fruit by inviting and enabling people to encounter Jesus (verses 28-30, 39) so that they can see for themselves (40-42).

QUESTIONS: Do you find it difficult to talk about your faith? What are the challenges to doing so?

[adapted from Christ is for Us p.53]: The theme of God's provision runs through the lectionary texts for this week. . . . As you reflect on your personal history, how has God provided for you physically and spiritually? How does that memory help you meet today’s challenges?