

3rd Sunday of Lent

Sometimes while I'm driving a car, I think the worst of other drivers. If I need the left lane, but another car is there, I think that that driver is deliberately blocking my way. Now, I know they're not, but sometimes we project incorrect motives onto someone else. "She got here late just to make me mad." "He didn't pick up his phone because he's avoiding me." Especially when there is silence, we think that someone is trying to make us a victim, even when they're not.

Moses had to put up with this. He had just brought his people safely out of slavery through the Red Sea, on the way to the Promised Land. But now they had to cross a desert. In today's passage from the Book of Exodus, the people have no water. They can't go back to Egypt. They are far from the verdant Promised Land. So they complain. They should have been grateful, but instead they thought the worst of their driver, Moses: "Why did you make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?"

Sometimes when things go wrong with our health, our family or our job, we blame God. "Why did you put that person in my life? Was it just to make me miserable? Why can't I pay my bills? Do you want me to die more quickly?" God desires what is good, but sometimes we think the worst of God.

Our catechumens also thirst for water, the water of baptism. These next three Sundays we celebrate the scrutinies with them. We pray that God will drive away from them whatever makes them think the worst of God, or to deny that there is a God. Our catechumens need to be purified and enlightened.

In the desert Moses asked God what to do, so God gave him a plan: "Go over there in front of the people, along with some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand, as you go, the staff with which you struck the river. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink." Moses went in public with witnesses to respond to all the complaints, and, staff in hand, he struck the rock. That's where this story ends. It does not say next what you think it should. It does not say, "And water gushed forth from the rock." All it says is that Moses did what God asked. It doesn't tell us if anything happened next.

Psalms 78 says that God brought forth water from the rock, and the Book of Numbers tells a similar story when Moses struck the rock twice. Water gushed forth, but God was angry that Moses didn't trust him. That story explains why Moses died before entering the Promised Land. But today's story comes from the Book of Exodus. If it were the only story we had about water from the rock, we would not know the ending. All we'd know is that Moses struck the rock.

Often this is how we go through life. Holding the staff of prayer in our hands we tap on the rock of heaven. We don't know if our effort will make the waters of God's mercy gush forth onto the earth. In that silence, we may think the worst. "God doesn't care. God doesn't listen. God isn't really powerful. God is an immovable rock." But those motives are no more accurate than the ones we assign to other people driving a car. Those drivers may be looking after our safety. And who knows? When you least expect it, God may feel the tap of your patient prayer and open his sacred heart with merciful streams of living water.

Sunday, March 19, 2017