

**A friend of mine in St. Louis is pastor of a large parish where they are dedicating a new church this weekend. The old church seats 600 people. The new church will seat 1200. It's costing them – he's not sure yet – probably over \$8 million for the church, the hall, the office building and the parking lot. For the dedication mass, they expect to use 42 communion ministers. I told him we feel pretty good if 42 people show up at our mass in Maysville every Sunday.**

**God can be present in large groups and small, among rich and poor, in times of strength and times of adversity.**

**The Israelites had to learn this on their journey through the desert. They really thought God had abandoned them. You remember the story. Israelites had migrated to Egypt, where they enjoyed the good life until a new Pharaoh took over. He enslaved them and forced them into hard labor. God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and commanded him to tell Pharaoh to set the people free. After ten plagues, Pharaoh happily let them go. Then he changed his mind and pursued the Israelites up to the Red Sea, which miraculously parted so the good guys could cross, and then the sea resumed its depth to swallow the enemy. After this dramatic escape from slavery, Israel walked from the Red Sea to the Promised Land. It wasn't easy. They entered the desert, and that is where they lost heart.**

**Today's first reading finds the Israelites deep in the desert. They are thirsty, and they grumble against Moses: "Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?" Moses asks God for help. After all, this whole journey was God's idea. God commands Moses to bring some of the elders to a certain rock in Horeb. Moses strikes the rock with his rod, and water flows from it. All the people, nearly dying of thirst in the desert, drank their fill from the most unlikely source of water: a rock.**

**Throughout Lent, we the Church enter a desert of the soul. We fast, we pray, and we give alms. We do all this to escape the sins that enslave us. Sometimes we despair, just as the Israelites did. We wonder how we got into our own private desert of bad habits, poor faith, ill health, and relationships gone wrong. We look around and we ask the question that ends today's first reading, "Is the Lord in our midst or not?"**

**During Lent the scriptures remind us that God is indeed in our midst, ready to give what we need to cross our own deserts in safety. Can God change a stony heart? Can God restore a broken friendship? Can God forgive the wrong we have done? Well, God brought water from a rock. God was so anxious to help the Israelites, he simply gave them what they needed from a source they didn't even know was there.**

**This week our parish will gather to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. If the Holy Spirit has been moving you this Lent to repent**

**from sin and to seek God's grace, come and join us this Thursday, as God brings forth from the rock of our sin streams of mercy and forgiveness.**