

3rd Sunday of Lent

Undergoing stress can affect our spiritual life. When things aren't going well, we may blame God. We may take it out on people we love. We may even doubt that God cares.

According to the Book of Exodus, when Moses led his people out of slavery through the desert toward the Promised Land, the trek was understandably stressful. With inadequate food, insufficient water, and hot days demanding physical exertion, the Israelites grumbled against Moses, quarreled, tested the Lord at a place called Meribah and Massah, and actually asked, “Is the Lord in our midst or not?” If you hear people complain today that some people in our generation lack faith, you may recall that even some following Moses experienced doubt.

In response to this reading, the lectionary gives us several verses from Psalm 95, a prayer many Christians use to start each day. It invites people to come into the presence of God, singing for joy, giving thanks, and bowing down in worship. It compares the community of believers to sheep whose shepherd is God.

But then the tone of this psalm shifts from the contentment of the people to the displeasure of God. We hear God’s voice speaking as through one of the prophets. Apparently, God never forgot about the grumbling in the desert. God had already shown great power by bringing the Israelites across the Red Sea, but in their stress, some of them wanted to go back to Egypt, fearing that Moses had simply led them to a wasteland to die. God helped them again, but their lack of trust in him obviously stung. At this point in Psalm 95 we hear God say to a new generation, “Don’t be like them.” “Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the desert, when your forebears put me to the test; when they tried me, though they saw my work.” The refrain we sang today reminds us not to imitate the bad behavior of some of our ancestors: “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.”

We hear God’s voice in many ways—especially in the scriptures, but also in the experiences of our lives. Whenever we undergo stress, it helps to reflect on past events when God did come to our rescue, when we were set free from something or someone who enslaved us. That memory can please God and bring us confidence in his power today. According to Psalm 95, God never forgot one particular day when the people rebelled; let God remember today as a day we heard his voice and found hope.

The refrain includes the phrase, “harden not your hearts.” A better translation in our culture might be, “harden not your heads.” God has done great things if you would only remember. Israel’s exodus from Egypt is a paradigm of the journey of each person’s life: God gave us new birth through a miracle of water, we enter a long time of striving, we remember the work of God in the past, and we press on to the future.

During Lent we adopt various penances to train ourselves for times of want. The well of God’s power and mercy is deep. When we remember the blessings of the past, we gain strength. There is plenty to drink.