

SERMON FOR THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT      MARCH 15, 2020  
Westminster Presbyterian Church -Rehoboth Beach

LESSONS:

Exodus 17:1-7

John 4:5-42

“INFECTIOUS”

It might seem weird that on a day when the worship service has been cancelled due to the wild virulence of the Coronavirus that the sermon is entitled “infectious”. However, the title found its way to this sermon earlier in the week when we were anticipating a host of precautions to implement for worship in the face of this virus, but weren’t expecting that the doors would be closed. Infectious is a word that both stirs and excites our emotions. Infectious is a way to describe something that belies all of our assumptions that we are independent, self-controlled, self-contained individuals. Infectious states slap us out of our illusions of self-importance and self-independence and wake us up to how intricately we are intertwined with one another! In the two stories we have before us today we can witness two very kinds of infectious spirits. Make no mistake, the spirits that enflame our souls are infectious. Conversely, the infectious behaviors that we get caught up in show what our own spiritual commitment is in that moment.

As I’ve noted each of the two preceding weeks, for this Lenten season I’ve chosen to focus on the power and gift of biblical stories. Lent is a period for reflection, more than of “giving something up.” It is a period of grace to review and reflect upon our own personal and spiritual roots and to ask to what extent what really matters to us is shaped by the kind of faith in God’s kin-dom that Jesus had. Biblical scholars have a technical term for significant cultural stories that shape societies and individuals’ sense of what’s right and wrong, and of

what really matters: they are called myths. However, because the common use of the word myth has a negative meaning—suggesting that the story is false, untrue, superstitious or just plain stupid—I prefer the term “high-story.” I use it in contrast to history. History’s purpose is to relate facts and accurate sequences of events of the past. High-story has a different purpose: it is to relate what is most critical for being human, what elevates humans above animal nature, what it means to be really human in the sense of bearing the image of God. High-stories invite us into them to find ourselves in the stories. That’s high-story. High-stories never have just one meaning. That’s why they last for centuries and millennia. They are able to continually unfold new horizons and shed new light on what it means in each new generation, and in the face of new threats, challenges, tempests and storms to be faithful humans awakened in Christ’s spirit and alive in God’s kin-dom.

So, in today’s stories I see humanity struggling with what it means to be infectious. It certainly isn’t the only way to read these stories; you’re likely able to read very different meanings in them. But here, in this week of facing a world-wide human threat by a microscopic little beast, I can see myself in both stories. I can then see that I always am faced with a choice.

We begin with the story of Moses and Israel. As we said before the Exodus reading, Israel is a newly liberated people. They cried out to God in their slavery, the misery of abuse, inhumane conditions, long hours of back-breaking labor with no human dignity. Many had endured beatings, some had to face the brutality of seeing their friends disfigured and raped. They are little better than animals to the Egyptians. They were dangerous outsiders who must be subjugated. But by God’s grace they are liberated, freed! And yet, freedom rarely means luxury! From Egypt they escape to the wilderness. They’re so new at freedom. What should they expect? Clearly their expectations had outpaced the reality of freedom. Three times Exodus tells of a challenge: first caught between the thundering armies of Pharaoh and the Red Sea; then encountering bitter

water in the only water source; then hungry in a place with nothing to eat. Each time they cry out, each time they accuse Moses of poor planning—his idiotic leadership has led them into dying of thirst or of starvation. Each time, however, something happens: a way opens up through the sea; a way is made for the bitter water to be made sweet; a source of food is found on the ground each morning, enough to satisfy hunger.

Certainly three times is a charm, right? Wrong! Once again, the story cycles around to water: they are thirsty except now, there's not even a source of BITTER water. Ok, Moses, why have you brought us out here to die. You, idiot, we thought you were trained in Pharaoh's court and learned all that high-fallutin' strategic planning. We thought you'd be the one who could actually lead us. Shoot! we at least had plenty to drink in Egypt (how soon we forget how bad things were, when we get into a pickle even though we are free).

Do you see the pattern here? Each challenge, each hardship, each surprising threat is met with almost the same reaction: complain and blame. How easy it is to complain about how lousy life is now (and to inflate and exaggerate how rosy life was back in the day!). Complaining takes on its own reality and distorts our own history. More importantly, complaining very often morphs into blaming. If something goes wrong, and we complain enough then it has to be someone's fault. Someone has to shoulder the blame. In this case it's Moses. And do you see how infectious complaining and blaming is?! It infects the whole camp, so much so that Moses complains to God, "Geez, these people are about to string me up by my thumbs!!"

You know what's sad about this story? Sure, God yet again shows a solution. Instead, it's the tragic reality that the solution isolates the people even more from Moses. Moses goes alone to Horeb (the mountain where God will again meet with Moses and give instructions of law and temple). There Moses strikes a rock from which water gushes. Unfortunately, the people who complained and blamed, isolating Moses in their hostility and derision, don't get

to witness the wonder that Moses witnessed. All they get is the water to quench their thirst. They didn't see the wonder that could have bathed their souls and baptized their hopes. Complaining and blaming are infectious. They are, OH, so very human. They infect and inspire the masses. In the infection of complaining and blaming we encounter the thrill of unity with all the complainers and blamers, the rush of rage against the supposed idiots that we blame. We might have our thirst quenched that somebody has to pay. But what do we miss? What arid places of our hearts remain dry, untouched? What wonders could we have witnessed. But at least we had a good time and good drink.

Then we come to another thirsty soul. Jesus is passing through Samaria. As you know Samaritans were not very much respected. They had opposed Jerusalem's resettlement after the exile to Babylon so many centuries before Jesus' day. Once Jerusalem had been resettled and a temple rebuilt, Samaria had built a temple too on Mt. Gerazim. Both Samaria and Jerusalem claimed to worship the God of Abraham and Jacob. But, of course, for Jesus' kin Jerusalem was the true temple and God certainly wouldn't favor Samaria. In fact, a generation before Herod the Great came to power the Hasmonean dynasty of Jewish priest-kings had actually attacked Samaria and destroyed THEIR temple. So no love was lost between them.

Jesus is thirsty and asks for a drink from a Samaritan woman (a double whammy — “why are you a Jewish male,” she says, “asking water from me a Samaritan woman”). And here's the odd twist. Jesus forgets about his thirst. Did you notice that he never got the drink that he asked for? Or maybe she dipped some out while they were talking: we'll never know. What we do know is that the woman responds to Jesus with incredulity and begins to talk about how different they are from each other. We see Jesus beginning to shine in his image of the kin-dom of God—Jerusalem/Samaria, Jew/Samaritan, Christian/Muslim, it really doesn't matter because “God is spirit and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.” What does that mean, must worship in spirit and truth?

I think it unfolds in what follows. Jesus obviously loses his consciousness of being thirsty, because he is really listening to a woman who sounds thirsty at a deeper level than the well can ever satisfy. She obviously is burdened. She is in need: in need of acceptance, of welcome, of kindness from a stranger. Could it be that the burden from the Jew-Samaritan hostility has taken its toll? Could it be that her marital history had ostracized her and she felt very much like Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne in the *Scarlett Letter*? Maybe this woman too carries a *Scarlett letter* emblazoned on all that she does. Whatever it might be, Jesus doesn't complain or blame he just invites her into his company just as she is. And she can't contain herself. It's as if Jesus had taken her to Horeb where, with her at his side, he struck the Rock within her own soul and the waters of grace poured from her eyes in tears of joy.

And that, too, became infectious! In her joy, her wonder, her reborn self she races back to her village and tells her story of being seen for who she is and being accepted, valued, welcomed, and loved. It was infectious. The whole town had to find out about this man because of the infectious story that she told. And many came to believe in this Jesus. I like to think of this believing in Jesus more like seeing life, God, and one another like Jesus saw them. I think they probably stayed Samaritans, they probably didn't join Jesus' church! But they were different. The vision of a kin-dom of God that reaches across barriers and boundaries to look for God's spirit in every human being, changed them! It changes us! Faith is not a competition between dueling dogmas. It is being immersed in the water that cannot be drawn from a well, cannot be drunk from a glass. It is the water that washes over us, in our isolation and insulation from one another, and carries us into communion, even when we are so different that no one would guess that we could be friends. This kind of being with another human being in spirit and truth, in acceptance and honesty is infectious!

And so it is, I believe, that we are always living with these infectious options. We can and too often easily yield to the infectious power of

complaining and blaming. But we can also yield to the infectious power of extravagant welcome and compassionate acceptance. When we are in the presence of that infectious power, we know what it means to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Amen.

Rev. Douglas Griffin

Interim Pastor

## **The Lessons**

### **First Lesson – Exodus 17:1-7**

*Introduction: Prior to today's story God has delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. First, when they left Egypt, Pharaoh's army trapped them between the desert and the Red Sea. They blamed Moses for leading them from Egypt to die in the desert, but God opened a way through the sea. A few days later, the only water source was polluted. The people complained against Moses that they were dying of thirst. God provided a way to make the water sweet. A few weeks later they came to the Sin desert between Egypt and Sinai and there was no food. The people complained against Moses that he should have left them in Egypt where at least they had food to eat. God provided a daily food called "manna." Now, in today's lesson they are on the move again. And again things don't go well for them.*

*Hear now the first lesson and listen for the word of God.*

From 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. The 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?" But 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?"

So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The 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. I 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. He called the place Massah and Meribah (which in Hebrew means "test" and "argument"), because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

## **Second Lesson – John 4:5-42**

*Introduction: After Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus, John's gospel states that Jesus and his disciples were baptizing close to where John the Baptizer was but John, when asked if it bothered him directed the inquirers' attention to what really matters: God's truth. Then Jesus decides to make his way back to Galilee heading the most direct route through Samaria.*

*Hear now the gospel lesson and listen for the voice of God.*

So Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 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.) 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." The

woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 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.” 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.”

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; 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?” 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. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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.”

*May these ancient words of scripture become for us the living word of God.  
Amen.*