

A Pastoral Letter from the Bishop: "Co-Operation" in the Wilderness

March 13, 2020

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?"

Exodus 17:1-7

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This Sunday is the Third Sunday in Lent. Just a few weeks ago, as this Lent began, none of us could have expected or foreseen the lives we would be living today. One could only look back at my Lenten video to know how oblivious we were to what our actual Lenten journey would be. It is completely out of date.

In the passage from Exodus assigned for this coming Sunday, the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness was much the same. They set out not knowing what to expect, and on the way, they came upon many challenges. In this one today, it was thirst. They had no water. They, like many groups of people, began to complain, asking Moses why he brought them out to this desolate place, what did he plan to do about it, and as so many do in times such as these, forgetting they had agreed to "follow" in the first place. As John F. Kennedy once said, "Success has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan."

The truth of this story, on this day, in this time we find ourselves in, is to know again, that "wilderness" is often not a place, but instead a state of mind. In the midst of all we know as usual and normal and safe, we often can, and are, still in the "wilderness." That is where we find ourselves now. And one of the greatest challenges in this time, of separation and isolation, is staying connected, and continuing to travel together. It was the Israelites' challenge too.

I would urge you to read this passage and see how THEY worked this out. God could have produced water out of thin air, essentially solved the problem immediately, and that is often how this passage is preached, or even heard by listeners. We jump to the miracle of water being found but forget all that it took for that to happen. So, I urge you to look at how this happens in this story. God does not produce water out of thin air. God, instead, is in relationship with the people, and specifically with Moses, and asks some things of Moses. In turn, Moses is in relationship with God. God leads Moses but does not solve the problem for him or for the people.

In the midst of our current "wilderness," we too have to think, live, and act relationally, while physically being apart. This is our Lenten journey now, a real one, where we are going to have to give up some of our precious routines, things we love, like the common cup, like coming together closely for worship, and now even gathering at all. We are being called to "co-operate" with God.

In my reading of the commentary on this passage, the commentator Terrence Fretheim wrote these words: "God is the creator and has made the world of nature in such a way that it has positive capacities. Human beings need to be alert to the potential resources within creation for resolving creational issues."¹

God did not create water out of thin air, but instead led Moses to water, in the rocks, where it resides. He showed Moses the part of creation where this thirst could be quenched.

I actually had a person say to me, "Why don't you just trust God and not put out any directives?"

To which I replied, "I do trust God, very much, and I do believe God will help us, but perhaps where my theology and yours differs is that 'God's help' is going to come largely through each of us." We are "how" God does this, through us. If you stand on the side of the road and pray for God to help you get to the other side. That is not going to happen, unless you engage your brain, your muscles, your movement, and get moving. God will be with you in that stroll across the street, and in you too, but to get there you are going to have to "co-operate."

In this wilderness we find ourselves in now, we have to "co-operate" with God. How? We need to "co-operate" with the health and governmental officials who have the huge responsibility of helping all of us try to slow this spread. We need to "co-operate" with each other. We need to help each other. I hate to say it, but I am going to: the brazen defiance to all of this is really a selfish response. Where possible, we have to give up, sacrifice, so that those who cannot fight this off, and so that those who will be called on to directly fight this off, can do it. The earth, our creation, is capable of slowing this down, but to do that, we have to "co-operate."

Like the Israelites, we are going to be very "thirsty" in the next weeks and months, for things we love, and things we think we have to have. Some have felt my actions and calls and directives have been overreactions. That is a criticism I am all-too-willing to accept, but I have to be clear that I am not going to, in the face of clear science, and a real threat to life, within our flock, but also simply within this human family we share, make my decisions solely based on rubrics in the prayer book, or traditional ways of liturgy, or even necessarily canon law. I am willing to call that "under reaction," and perhaps even more "fiddling while Rome burns." And by the way, Rome is having some serious problems right now.

It is actually "under reactions" like this, that people, who might be drawn to the Church, watch us stay mired in our ecclesiastical dream worlds while the real world, that contains all of it and us, finds itself in such trouble, and needs us, doubt our relevance. In the face of this threat and communal need, to defend Christendom, instead of embracing the Gospel, is an adventure in missing the point.

I can be deprived of the common cup if I can possibly save one life or the life of my neighbor or lessen the stress on our health care worker heroes now on the front lines. I can be deprived of meeting in community for a while so that my elders might get to live a bit longer in our world. I can be deprived of face-to-face Bible Study if it means we might end this quicker, so people do not lose jobs and lose homes. This is the "wilderness" after all, and what else do we expect? Why do we think ourselves so much better, or different, or exempt?

I have to say I have been most inspired by how much faster our Jewish and Muslim friends were able to find this sentiment in their Scripture, and as a true part of their faith, and a bit disappointed at how so many of our kind have been slow to make that connection, defending our practices and tradition over the welfare and well-being of our fellow travelers.

At the end of this passage from Exodus, the people ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" This is always the question in times like these. That question, for me, got answered in Jesus Christ. The good news of this story, and our story now, is God is right in the middle of it with us all, loving us, leading us, but also expecting us to "co-operate."

So, I say to you Olympians, how very grateful I am for all of you. I have been so inspired by your resilience, your dedication, and your Gospel sensibilities throughout all of this. Let's hold onto that, to the God that is impervious to any virus, or challenge, or separation, who is with us in the midst of everything, and who loves us no matter what. Let's emulate that love, even in this new reality, in every way we can, as we journey together in this wilderness.

Be blessed, stay well, take care of each other. You are all in my prayers and I ask you to continue your prayers for me.

+Greg

1. Working Preacher, Internet, March 15, 2020.

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Live-Streaming Services for Sunday: While there are many others that will be happening this weekend and more in the weeks to follow, I would like to draw your attention to two services that will be live-

streamed this Sunday.

1. [Saint Mark's Cathedral, 11:00am PST](#)
2. [The National Cathedral, 8:00am PST](#)

Some ways to help: Many have asked how to help in situation that we know will arise, but we are unsure how we will respond. Here are three ways, locally, and internationally.

1. So many have asked if we could start a fund at the diocesan level to be used to help those who are going to lose jobs or have reduced pay due to loss of work, being at home with children who are out of school, or any need. I so appreciate that, and that fund has been set up. You can give to it online through our diocesan website by selecting "COVID-19 Response" from the "Giving Options" dropdown menu. If you cannot give this way and you wish to send a check, you can send that to the diocesan office with a notation for "COVID-response." [GIVE HERE](#)
2. Chaplains on the Harbor, our amazing ministry to the homeless in Grays Harbor County, has reminded us that the homeless don't get the luxury of quarantine, warm water hand washes for 20 seconds, hand sanitizer, or warmth period. Our ministry there is doing heroic work. You can also give to them also on our diocesan website by selecting "Chaplains on the Harbor" from the dropdown menu or by sending a check to the diocesan office with "Chaplains on the Harbor" in the notation. [GIVE HERE](#)
3. American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem: As you know I serve as Chair of the Board of this ministry and the Diocese of Olympia has had an over 20-year companion relationship with Jerusalem. As many of you are aware Israel/Palestine has been hit hard by this. Palestine is completely closed off. And many of the ministries there have been greatly affected. Tourism is their lifeblood and that as all but ended. Archbishop Dawani has asked us to set up a similar fund to the one we are setting up here to help those he can help who have lost jobs, homes, and incomes. You can give to this fund by going to the AFEDJ website and donating. [GIVE HERE](#)

Contact Info

The Rt. Rev. Greg Rickel
Bishop of Olympia
1551 10th Ave E
Seattle, Washington 98102
206-325-4200
206-325-4631 FAX

grickel@ecww.org

[Bishop Rickel's Blog](#)