

Ken Overberg, S.J.
Third Sunday of Lent, March 24, 2019

Whatever the liturgical year (this year it is Luke), the church allows us to use the three special gospels from John in Lent to help us reflect on faith and our baptismal commitment. These three stories—the woman at the well, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus—can enrich the lives not only of our elect but of all of us. Coming to faith, the maturing of faith in suffering, faith confronting death: these are the essentials of the three stories. Symbols of water, sight, and life remind us of Baptism and encourage us to move to a profound level of meaning, through all the wonderful details of the stories. So today we will hear the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well.

Scripture scholar Ray Brown has called John’s whole gospel the autobiography of the Johannine community. Today’s gospel drama likely did not happen in Jesus’ life. But it did happen in the life of John’s community, when a group of Samaritans became part of that community. And remember, there was no such thing as a “good Samaritan.” The Jews and Samaritans hated each other, even desecrating the other’s temple. But now they were part of one community, bringing together their traditions, re-formed by their experience of the risen Jesus.

Today’s first reading from Exodus introduces the rich symbol of water. Along with the dramatic flow of water, this text also reminds us of our shared humanity as we too doubt and grumble when things go badly. In the second reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans, we hear of faith, hope, and love. We also hear Paul’s interpretation of Jesus’ death—a questionable view for some of us!

Savor the richness of our readings and the Scrutinies. Take in the nourishment where you can. Perhaps a particular image or point will be just what you need today, this week, this Lent.

Let’s listen to God’s word!

From today’s wealth of images and insights, I’d like to mention two. First, at the end of the gospel the Samaritans proclaim that they have come to believe, not just because of the woman’s testimony, but because of their own encounter with Jesus. Many if not most of us first believed because someone told us to

believe. But finally, for many, that is not enough. At some point, the stories and rituals along with our experiences have led us to Jacob's well, to an encounter with Jesus, to an awareness of Holy Mystery. Our belief is rooted in our experience. Still, events can discourage us; routine can numb us. We grumble like the Hebrews in the desert. So Lent and these gospels on faith invite us to renewal and refreshment, to new life and recommitment to our Baptism this Easter.

Second, Paul and others, perhaps overwhelmed by the horror of Jesus' death, were unable to hold on to Jesus' vision of a God of forgiveness and compassion, a God of nonviolence. They slipped back into the ancient religion of "violence saves." It infects us still. We hear it often in Lent. But the God implied in that view is not the God of Jesus, who sends the rain on the just and the unjust, the God who welcomes home the prodigal son not with a rebuke but with a party!

Jesus is not Plan B sent to make up for sins. Jesus is God's first thought, sent to share divine life and love. Our God wants us to flourish--in mutuality, intimacy, compassion, nonviolence, and faithful love and service.

Surely this view can be living water for us. Will you too ask for a drink?