

## REJOICING IN SUFFERING

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Rev. S. D. Spencer – Pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church  
Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5:1-8, John 4:5-26

*Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN!*

### I. A Lesson from Exodus 17

“Is the Lord among us or not?!”

When Moses describes the showdown at Rephidim, that’s how he summarized the complaint of the people. By the Lord’s mighty hand, they’d been recently delivered from slavery in Egypt. When they had come upon a spring of bitter water, the Lord had sweetened it for them that they might drink. By His gracious hand, manna fell from the heavens and quail flew into the camp so that they have meat to eat. All of this happened early on in the wilderness journey. The crossing of the Red Sea was still fresh in their minds. Yet here they were grumbling and not the harmless “my aching feet” or “that camel stinks” sort of complaining; but grumbling against Moses and the Lord, accusing them of dishonesty and malice. ***“Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”*** In a revealing moment, all of God’s extraordinary acts were shoved aside, replaced with accusations that God used Moses to lure them to death. It’s amazing because just two chapters ago, they sung, ***“You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode”*** (Exodus 15:13). Now they grumbled feeling God-forsaken, crying, ***“Is the Lord among us or not?”***

Had God forsaken them? Of course not! Was He among them? Absolutely! Where was He? They could see Him. They could see the pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night. They could see the Lord’s presence that had led them out of Egypt. They could hear Him, speaking His Word to them through His servant, Moses. He was not far away. He was with them. But the immediate danger of thirst seemed so big that the Lord and His mercy were overshadowed. That’s always the flaw in the vision of sinners: God looks so small and distant that He can’t possibly have any power or presence among us.

The people quarreled. How did the Lord respond? Graciously! He told Moses, ***“Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.”*** Moses did as instructed and the people were rescued once again. The Lord was with them to give them life. This was by no means the end. The people would grumble again and again. They would worship a golden calf and fear man more than God. But God would keep His promises. He would not forsake them. In fact we hear and ponder what St. Paul says of this episode in 1 Corinthians 10:4: ***those in the wilderness “all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.”*** Was the Lord among them? You bet!

A word of caution here and forewarning: we have the same sinful flesh as they had. It’s easy to believe that the Israelites of old were especially prone to stubbornness and doubt, superstition and greed. But if you were displaced from your home to a place where basic necessities were not evident, the temptations would be the same. The devil will always do his best to warp your vision, to magnify your fears and worries as to make God look insignificant and unhelpful. Be warned, for that is what you will see. But it is not true but a deceptive lie from the devil.

### II. A Lesson from John 4

Where is God for the woman in the Gospel lesson? She is not a two-dimensional fictional cartoon character used as an illustration. She lived in Samaria two-thousand years ago, suffering from one failed relationship after another. We don't know why. We don't know if she made a mess of her life or if life made a mess of her. Oh she was sinful certainly. Was her life completely her fault? Probably not! We just don't know. But after five husbands and yet another man, it's easy to infer that this woman has little sense of worth, with little hope for happiness. Where is the Lord for her?

He's sitting at the well. He appears to her as an ordinary man, though one who is merciful, not predatory. Far from avoiding her because of her sin, He has sought her out. He has come to this well for her. Just as He did for the Israelites in the wilderness, He offers her living water for eternal life. He doesn't excuse her sin or justify it. He comes to take it away, to forgive her. He tells her she is not forsaken. He tells her that the Father seeks out such people as her.

We learn a lesson from this text today. Beware, be warned: you are the same sinful flesh as she. We are so vulnerable and devastated when a relationship is broken—by death or betrayal, stupid mistakes or bad intentions, whatever reasons. Few things can leave us so knotted inside, feeling so worthless and violated. Feeling forsaken! The devil will use the opinions and malice of others to argue that God has no love for you and beware; it will be easy to believe, but this not true but a clever lie of the devil.

### III. The Good News of Romans 5:1-8

These are lessons to be learned and warnings to be heeded for a simple reason: suffering is guaranteed. You may be displaced from where you want to be: from employment or school or friends or loved ones. You may be deprived of things you hold dear. You may not have even gotten there in the first place. You will suffer broken friendships, lost loves, estranged family and grief. You may be angry that, every time your routine shapes up and you finally get going, something changes to throw you off track again. You may just wonder if you can ever feel happy again, instead of the gloom that fills your days. You'll be tempted to withdraw for a while, withdraw from worship to nurse yourself a little. You'll be tempted to believe those voices that claim that suffering is proof that the Gospel is of no practical value. A voice that tells you that pain is evidence that God doesn't care. You'll be tempted to believe that afflictions have far more power than the Lord who often works behind the scenes for your good. And you'll be tempted to ask, "**Is God with me or not?** And if so where is He?"

And if that's not you right now, then perhaps you think this is a meaninglessly dark sermon. But dark days come to us all sooner or later. It's all the better to know the Good News beforehand, so you might be much better prepared.

To all those who suffer, St. Paul declares in our epistle the comfort that is yours, the confidence you have for you are justified by faith.

You've been justified: God declares that you are not guilty for your sins anymore. Furthermore, you are justified by faith, not by your works. God not only says you are not guilty, but He also says you are not guilty because Jesus has taken your sins to the cross (†). You're not justified by what you have done. You're justified by what Jesus has done, you know this by the faith and forgiveness He gives you. And what does this mean? It means you have peace with God through your Lord Jesus Christ. That's huge!

When it is given to you to suffer, you will be tempted to wonder if God is angry with you, if He holds your sins against you. But you know the answer. When the devil, the world or your own sinful flesh whisper that into your ears, you can say, "God is not angry with me. He took out all of His anger at the cross on Jesus. He has no anger left for me. Instead, He says that I'm not guilty anymore. He

says that He has made me His beloved child for Jesus' sake. Though I must endure turmoil now, I know that I am at peace with God. Rather than fear what He will do next, I have the confidence that He will use all things for my good, and that He will deliver me in His time." This is your foundation when you must confront suffering: in Jesus, you are right with God. God doesn't hold your sins against you. You are at peace with God.

That's only the beginning. You're not just justified, but you have access. In Christ, you have access to forgiveness and faith, those free gifts of God. Forgiven and believing, you have access to the Father's ear. He hears your prayers. He delights to hear your prayers so much that He commands you to pray. The Son sits at the right hand, interceding for you. The Spirit shapes your prayers into petitions that are suitable to be heard. The one who suffers will be tempted to ask, "Does God listen anymore?" You already have the answer: He does and He will! For Jesus' sake, He hears your prayers; and He promises that He will answer them according to His will, in the way that is best for you.

Sometimes what is best for you may not be immediate relief from turmoil. St. Paul also declares that suffering has a purpose, so much so that we are called to rejoice in our sufferings. Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character. It is in our sufferings that we learn to acknowledge our weakness. We learn not to love this world which is passing away. And by faith, we truly appreciate the hope we have in Christ. You have hope in suffering. All people suffer, but not all people have hope. You have the certain hope that Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, chose to be born into this dying world. He took on flesh and bore your sins and infirmities to the cross (†). There He died for you, and then He conquered the grave for you! Apart from Him, one can only hope for a life of minimal suffering before death; or one may hope for death because the suffering is far too great. You have a better hope: death is not the end. It is the last enemy under Jesus' feet, and He will use it to deliver you, raising you from the dead. Your sufferings do not have the last word. Christ does, and His Word is life—eternal life.

See, sufferings are a tool of sin to beat you down, reduce you to nothing. You are important and not nothing, you are a child of God. You are the one for whom Christ has died. Where sin would leave you lost in suffering and shame, Christ declares that you are remembered. You are His. You are loved. How can you be sure? For this very reason, St. Paul concludes our text with these words: **"God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** That's how you can be sure: if Jesus has redeemed you at such a price of His own blood, He will not forsake you.

The Lord is as near to you as He was to the Israelites in the wilderness. He is as present with you as He was with the Samaritan woman at the well. He does not veil His glory in a cloud or human flesh. Rather, Jesus—God and man—comes to you in words and water, bread and wine. He has brought life to your thirsty soul in the living water of Holy Baptism: there He said, "You are Mine, now and forever, no matter what happens." He has fed you with His Word, strengthening your faith so that you might endure suffering, look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. He feeds you His own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins; and where yours body fails, His will not, for He strengthens and preserves you in the one true faith unto life everlasting.

Sufferings will come, but the Lord is with you always, so that you might be always with Him. You are justified. You have access. You have hope. Because of all of this you can be certain that you are His child. For in Christ Jesus all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the (†) Holy Spirit. In Jesus name and for Jesus sake, Amen and Amen!

*The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,*  
**AMEN!**