

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (A)
Exodus 17: 3-7 Psalm 95 Romans 5: 1-2,5-8 John 4: 5-42
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

These next Sundays in Lent place three significant symbols of our faith before us--water, light and life. The gospel narrative today is about water and, from earliest times, it has also been associated with catechumens preparing for baptism. It is also favorite for many of us. First, we can identify with Jesus' very human condition as he approaches the well. He is tired from his travels and thirsty in a very arid place. We cherish the conversation between him and the midday woman who arrives by herself to draw water. We feel as if we are given a privileged place, allowed to listen in on a personal conversation. Of course, we soon realize that it is not just a personal conversation at all, but is meant for each of us listening in. We hear the story of a woman whose life changes from unbelief to faith—and still more—she becomes one who proclaims Christ to others.

What is true for the woman is true for us. In the midday heat of life, as we try to live faithful lives, we find ourselves needing refreshment to stay the course--indeed, to keep us even wanting to try! The struggle to live as Christians can feel, at times, like a trek in a dry place. In daily life there often is little around us that refreshes or supports our faith. Where shall we find the faith-renewing water we need? To whom shall we go? Today's readings remind us.

The first reading tells us of the thirst the people of Israel had. The story gets right to the point—the people are thirsty, and God gives them the water they need. To their question, “Is the Lord in our midst or not?” the answer is straight forward, “Yes indeed!” God will not let these people die in the desert. Paul shows us another way that God quenches our thirst. He tells the Romans they are “justified by faith.” We need the water that cleanses us of sin and our alienation from God and from each other. In our desert we could not provide that life-giving water, but God could--- and did. Paul tells us of God's love for sinners and the free gift of faith we have been given in the waters of baptism. In effect, Paul is answering our question, “Is God in our midst, or not?” His answer, “Yes indeed!” When Paul tells the Romans they have been “justified by faith,” he is reminding them that the beginning of their new life, their baptismal gift of faith, came, not by their own efforts, but from God. Or, as Jesus says in the gospel, “If you knew the gift of

God....” All is gift. We can’t make the gift happen; we can’t produce water in our deserts; but we need the gift to survive and to continue each day to take one more step to freedom

There are lots of daily conversations we have, some are trivial—to kill time, as we wait for a train, words spoken around an office water cooler, etc. Others are necessary—we ask for directions, we call for a doctor’s appointment, ask a spouse to pick up a child after school, etc. But other conversations are more life-shaping, and we must have them: we make commitments to one another; begin a new friendship; cement an old one; attempt to mend divisions, etc. These are conversations of significance, and they are essential for our having a meaningful life. In today’s gospel we get to listen in on one of these conversations

Because of whom she is and who Jesus is, the conversation goes quickly to the heart of the matter. It quickly addresses issues of importance, like: Who am I? Where am I going? What am I doing? What change do I need to make in my life? Am I happy with things as they are? These are significant issues, perhaps not the stuff of most everyday conversations—but periodically we must address them. We need to stop the rush of our lives, sit by some well of refreshment, as the woman did, take a breath, pause to reflect by ourselves, or with someone who is significant and ask the questions that count—to have a “conversation of significance.”

I don’t want this to sound overly “spiritual” and out of the realm of our regular lives. Recently I had one of those very bumpy flights that makes me wonder why I do what I do! I had missed a flight to Dallas; had to make arrangements for another flight and call ahead to the person who was supposed to meet me at the airport. I grabbed a bite to eat at the airport, a cold “Chinese plate,”—which I doubted a native Chinese person would recognize. In the midst of all that, while I waited for the next flight, I opened a letter from a friend, a busy traveler himself. He sent me a copy of an article from one of those wellness magazines, it was titled, “How to Manage Stress.” How appropriate. The article suggested, “find things that make your spirit soar.” And it gave examples: music, reading, nature, meditation and prayer. It wasn’t a religious article, but it recommended, “take time for spiritual pursuits on a regular basis.” In light of today’s gospel, I would add to the magazine’s advice and say, “Find time for a “conversation of significance.”

The gospel today shows someone whose life was stressful. There is a hint of this in

the fact that she came to the well later in the day, by herself. She may have been an outcast in the community so, to avoid the reproachful looks and words of others, she waited for a time when no one else would be there. She had a thirst that the water she went to draw from the well could not satisfy. She paused though to have a “conversation of significance.” She did what that wellness newsletter recommended, she found something (someone) who could “make her spirit soar.” We listen in on the conversation and even before she goes back to tell her townsfolk what she has learned, we learn something about Jesus. The woman is helping us discover who he is. Like her, can we admit our thirst? Shall we too engage Jesus in a “conversation of significance?” It will require the honesty the woman portrays. She shows us that we need to listen to what he has to say—as we do each time we gather in worship to hear these gospel narratives. And like her, we must be willing to change.

The woman at the well has set a good example for us: she was willing to break the pattern of her routine, ask important questions, listen to the answers and make the adjustments necessary in her life. She may not have had the best reputation in her community, but that did not hold Jesus back from offering her his full presence and the opportunity for a new life. She is a word of encouragement for any of us who might hold back or feel shy of having a completely open conversation with Christ. Her courage give us courage; she prods our faith. (As does Paul today when he reminds us that “while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”)

The woman’s conversation with Christ stirs those of us preparing for baptism at the Easter vigil to believe that: the waters of baptism will wash over us and forgive us; free us from the power of the false allures of sin and bring us fully into a community that gathers often at the well to ask important questions and listen to the what the Lord has to say to us.

Our eucharist celebration is a well of deep, living water. It gives us a chance to do as the woman did---pause and enter into a conversation of significance with Jesus. Where are we now in our lives? Where do we hope to go? What does he want to give us for our journey? What, in the image of the gospel, “living water,” do I need right now in my life? Reflecting back on the article I read in the airport--- to have a chance to be at liturgy, hear God’s Word with a community of believers and to be nourished by the very life of Jesus in the eucharist, is an opportunity to “make your spirit soar.”

QUOTABLE

Because I am a woman involved in practical cares, I cannot give the first half of the day to these [spiritual] things but must meditate when I can, early in the morning and on the fly during the day. Not in the privacy of a study— but here, there and everywhere—at the kitchen table, on the train, on the ferry, on my way to and from appointments and even while making supper or putting Teresa to bed.
—Dorothy Day, quoted in, “Living With Christ: Your Daily Spiritual Companion.”
Novalis: Mystic, Ct. February 2005, page 101.(1-800-321-0411)

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Challenge: Improve Water Quality

Nearly 88 percent of the rain and snow that falls on the United States each year falls on private land before it flows toward our reservoirs, drinking water faucets, and coastal nursery grounds for fish. That land can either cleanse or pollute the water. Because most of this precipitation falls on farmland, farm practices dictate water quality.

Many farmers already implement some practices to keep sediment, fertilizers, and pesticides on their farms and out of rivers and streams. But because farming occupies so much of the land and relies heavily on the use of chemicals, it is not surprising that agricultural runoff is the leading source of fertilizers, pesticides, salts, and sediments that wash into rivers, lakes, and bays.

The numbers available from state water sampling show the significance. Today, states have identified farm runoff as a source of pollution to more than 100,000 river miles (1/3 of those sampled), half of the country's lakes, and 40 percent of America's estuaries. In some states, polluted runoff from farms accounts for more than 90 percent of river pollution. Overall, the percentage of rivers that cannot fully support aquatic life or are unsafe for fishing and swimming grew from 26% in 1984 to 36% in 1996.

-----from the “Environmental Defense” webpage :
www.environmentaldefense.org/home

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Keith Wiley #0654009 (On death row since 5/27/99)

William Anthony #0654093 (6/3/99)

James Jaynes #0206197 (6/4/99)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others

respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com