

Sermon for 3 Lent, Year A
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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I'd like to talk a little bit about something that is near and dear to me, because God has seared it into my soul. It's the desert. My childhood was spent in the Kudzu covered green of Georgia and the rolling green hills of New England. But when I left my father's house, I served Uncle Sam in the desert: west Texas and southern New Mexico, Eastern California, Saudi Arabia, Iraq south of the Euphrates. After college, I served God in the desert: with Youth With a Mission I went to the Jordanian desert, the Negev in the south of Israel, the Judean desert around the Dead Sea. And during seminary, I spent a summer in the West Bank.

So I have seen my share of deserts. I remember the first time I flew into El Paso at the age of 19. Looking out the window, I couldn't see anything but sand and yuccas. And I remember being dropped off by bus in the middle of the Saudian desert, where there was nothing but white sand and blue sky as far as the eye could see. I have lived through sandstorms that drove sand through a sealed tank hatch, and I have also looked down from a mountain in New Mexico to see a little cloud dropping a precise sheet of silver rain on a very small patch of the valley below.

The desert epitomizes death and suffering and isolation. And yet there is a fascinating beauty to it. The desert is beautiful, because there is nothing there to distract you from the work of God. Because there is so little there, what *is* there is obviously a miracle. The desert is where you are completely dependent on God for food, for water, for hope. Because you are isolated and surrounded by an icon of death, you can learn to trust God. In the desert, God is obviously in charge.

Of course, it takes a while to get to all that. It comes out of almost two decades of reflection on what God has done in my life. And that's about half the time the Israelites spent wandering with God in the desert. And they started out as slaves, so I had a head start on them anyway.

What we see in our Old Testament reading is the same process that we all have to go through. We learn to trust God because he cares for us in the deserts of our lives. For some of us they are figurative deserts. For some of us, like the nation of Israel and me, God has to get literal.

God brings forth water for his people in the desert. Even though they are grumbling. Even though they are threatening Moses. Even though he has proven over and over again that he is trustworthy. Even though they still don't trust him, God does it again.

The water that comes out of the rock is life. But if Israel had been somewhere other than the desert, they would not have been able to learn that it was God who was taking care of them. They are in the desert to learn that one thing: faith. After all

that miraculous intervention, they are still asking, “Is the Lord among us or not?” This scene is one of a long series in which God is teaching his people to trust him and obey him.

Now jump forward over a thousand years to the woman at the well in Samaria. She is in a desert too. She comes to the well when the sun is at its highest, when everyone else in the village is trying to avoid the heat. She has had six of the men in the village, and whatever happened to the first five, she is probably not popular with the other women, who came to draw water in the cool of the morning. The man with whom she is living will not marry her, so she is an adulteress. And so she lives this anti-life, avoiding social contact when possible, going out when others are in, staying in when others are out.

And Jesus, doing the will of his Father, sits down beside the well to wait for this meeting that has been planned in the perfect mind of God. And what does he offer her? Living water, life and salvation. The very contact with a person who isn't using her or reviling her would have been living water to her soul. But it turns out that he is the very rock from whom all living water flows. And he offers to give her water and life that will never run dry within her. “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

In a sense, this actually comes true within the story itself. This isolated woman living a shameful desert existence comes to overflow with the life that Jesus gives her. The whole village is watered by the well within her. And they come to Jesus because of her testimony.

The truth is that the whole world is a desert. All around us, we find people who don't have the life that God gives through Jesus. They are isolated in the midst of death and suffering. And they don't trust God any more than the Israelites did. The world itself buys into the grumbling and the rebellion of which God had to cure his own people.

But as Christians, we are all given the internal wellspring of life that Jesus promised the Samaritan woman. Sometimes God takes us out into the desert to teach us to trust him. But once we do, he wants us to be oases, islands of life and health in the midst of the wasteland. We aren't perfect. By ourselves, we aren't really more holy than others. But we are in Christ, and we have his life flowing in us. And we should *overflow*, just as that one adulterous woman welled up and overflowed and watered a whole village into life.

Man does not live by bread alone, nor by the water flowing from the rock in the desert, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. Jesus says, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.” And if that is true of Jesus, it must be true of us. When was the last time you asked God what he wanted you to do? When was the last time you did it?