

**3 Lent – Year A – March 30, 2011 - Homily**  
**Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42**  
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For those who are familiar with the service of Morning Prayer, you'll have recognized the portion of Psalm 95 that we call the *Venite*. Tonight's Psalm is both modern and ancient. It is at the heart of our daily prayers, which are part of our transforming relationship with God in Christ Jesus. It's also an ancient prayer, containing significant indicators of God's steadfast love and faithfulness towards His children. Biblical scholar, Erhard Gerstenberger, describes Psalm 95 as an example of early Jewish preaching, "a sermon with a hymnic introduction." The Psalm can actually be broken down into two major sections. It begins with praise and adoration to God, and for God's wondrous ways. God is worshipped as the political and sovereign ruler, "a great King above all gods". God is worshipped as the sovereign sustainer, whereby all of creation is "in His hands". God is worshipped as creator, and everything is described as being formed by His hands. And we are told that God's people worship God because of His immanent and transcendent activity in relation to humanity. We bow and kneel before the Lord our maker, because He is our shepherd, and we are His sheep. We all know from the Gospel of John, and from our own Sunday school days that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep, and that His sheep listen to His voice. The image of a shepherd and shepherding would be very familiar to the Israelites, even if it is less so today. That is, except for the fact that it is a recurring theme throughout the Hebrew and New Testament Scriptures. At Christmas, we often sing *The First Noel*, about the shepherds who were some of the first witnesses to Jesus' birth, the Word made flesh, and again, we have daily reminder of this image of the Good Shepherd in our Morning Prayer service.

The second half of the Psalm takes on a much more somber tone. If the first half is about God's people acknowledging God's greatness through their worship, praise and adoration, the second half of the Psalm is about God's disappointment with His children, who have a long history of faithlessness, rebellion and disobedience to God. There is no more powerful image for the Israelites, or a modern day Jew than to recall the Exodus event, and the wilderness experience before God's people entered the Promised Land. Tonight's reading from Exodus explains the reference in this Psalm to the hardening of hearts and sulky rebelliousness of God's children in the wilderness. That rebelliousness resulted in a significant delay in God's blessing to His children. Note that God does not deny the people, but organizes a delay, in order to prepare the people to receive the blessing of the Promised Land with right hearts, and in right relationship with God. Overall, there are at least three main points being made in the Psalm. First, remembering is good, because we don't learn from our mistakes unless we are intentional about our repentance, and amendment of our lives in God's service. Secondly, as tonight's reading from Romans reminds us, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5). God is with us, always. The third lesson for each of us is a combination of the first two points. God wants us to remember God's graceful acts among us. God wants us to trust Him without needing constant proof of God's goodness.

"O that today you would listen to his voice!" says the Psalmist. That means now, this moment, and every moment of our lives. The word "today" functions as a timeless reminder that we only have the present to make our choices. The question for us is the same one that the Israelites faced in the wilderness, and the one that all God's children across the ages must answer. In faith, are we going to obey God's will today – this moment – or are we going to choose our own path, or demand that God provide us with even more evidence of His goodness and love? To walk in faith is to trust God with our whole self, and our whole lives. If we do, will we find everything is always going to be perfect? Of course not! The walk of faith in Christ Jesus is also the way of the cross. Yet Paul has reminded us that the way of suffering is also a path of growth and transformation, trust and hope. Our striving to be obedient to God in the integrity of our

faith will not stop us from stumbling and falling from time to time. So, we come full circle back to the beginning of the Psalm, where we offer our praise to God our creator and sustainer, because of God's goodness, greatness, and steadfast love.

The season of Lent is a season of accountability. It is a time of becoming more intentional in our spiritual lives and disciplines; more intentional in our study of Scripture; more intentional in getting real about who we are and Who God is, so that we might deepen our relationship with God. The season of Lent is a time of preparation. The April newsletter is in the mail, and you'll see that I talk a little about fasting, one of the most popular spiritual disciplines of Lent. It can mean that we literally put our bodies into God's hands by not eating for one or more days, or it can mean that we give up certain foods like desserts, or coffee, or something else that we enjoy as a gift to God in His service, and in imitation of Christ Jesus who also practiced fasting. All spiritual disciplines, including fasting, help us to grow stronger in our obedience to God's will. The word obedience is not a popular concept in today's culture. We want to feel good, and exercise our independence. Obedience sounds like a restraint or a limit on our lives, doesn't it? In a cultural philosophy that insists that we're damaging children's self-esteem if we say anything negative, we now have several generations of adults who were consistently told, often quite irrespective of actual behavior that "You're great. You're the best. You can do anything you want." The definition and impetus behind that philosophy is aimed at worldly success like a great career, acquiring money, and so on. Unfortunately, that philosophy diminishes or even dismisses as unimportant personal accountability and responsibility. We are all living with the consequences of inflated egos, and gross over-confidence in our abilities.

As usual, Jesus turns everything upside down, and the Scriptures tell us that we should lose our lives in Christ in order to gain real life, that we should love God first, and our neighbors as ourselves. Scripture also tells us that far from being damaging, when we are grounded in humble and obedient faith in Christ Jesus and service to God, difficulties and suffering are character building. And so we discover that if we can give up a little thing for forty days, then we have deepened our relationship with God by drawing closer to Him, and extended our relationships with others, by offering ourselves in service to Christ. We find that we are empowered to hear and obey the still small voice of the Holy Spirit. We learn that by God's grace we gain strength to resist temptations. Resisting temptation in a small thing, like giving up a favorite food, helps us to grow spiritually, *and* to resist even greater temptations at other times in our lives. This is how Jesus puts it in Luke's Gospel, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much" (Luke 16:10).

From the two major sections of Psalm 95, we can see that there is a balance between praising God for God's good creation, including our own lives, and praising God for our re-creation through His steadfast love and faithfulness in relation with His children. We are each made new in Christ Jesus, and by God's grace, every day we are re-created and transformed through our faith in Him. As we say in the Eucharistic prayer, "It is right to give God thanks and praise." Praise and worship of God is the offering of our lives in faith and obedience. Praise and worship of God is our sacrifice of thanksgiving to God, preparing us to do God's work in the world, as co-creators with God in Christ Jesus. As it has been said, "In order to create there must be a dynamic force, and what force is more potent than love?" (Igor Stravinsky). Our Psalm is a great reminder that we gather in community to offer our worship and praise to God at all times: in good times, and in tough times.

Amen.