

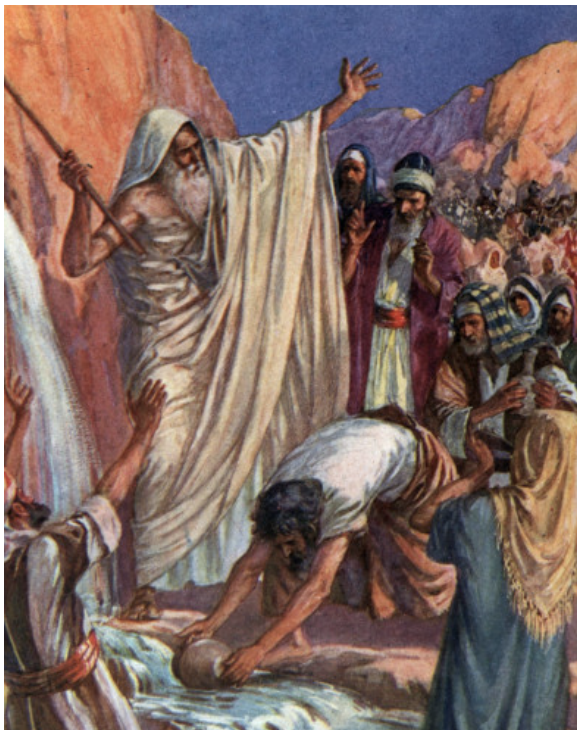
3rd Sunday of Lent

Cycle A, 3.15.20

Exodus 17:3-7; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42

AN UNEXPECTED LENTEN SACRIFICE

In today's first reading from the Book of Exodus, we witness the people of Israel as they struggled with the challenges and the graces, the suffering and the triumphs, the moments of hope and of utter frustration that marked their arduous forty year journey through the desert and into the Promised Land.



For every Lent, this historic journey of the Israelites is the symbol of the People of God in our own day, attempting to follow the pathway of the Lord amidst the uncertainty and obstacles that lie all around us in the modern world. But in this Lent, in this moment, our Lenten journey has taken on new dimensions as we confront a global pandemic that will, for a time, upend our normal way of life and call us to a deepened sense of sacrifice and faith. In these forty days we will bear Lenten penances not of

our own choosing, the necessity of which we will not fully understand.

The great temptation of the Jewish people in the wilderness was that of fear and panic, a loss of confidence, community and trust. And in these days of spreading illness and economic losses, fear seems all around us -- fear of becoming ill, fear for the health and safety of those whom we love, fear for economic security for ourselves and our families, and the fear that comes from the recognition that, for some of the most vulnerable among us, this pandemic will claim their lives.

It is important for us all to distinguish between giving in to fear and the steps that we need to take in prudence to protect the health and the common good of the whole of our society. Each of us will have obligations in these days to protect ourselves, our families, and the entire community. It is out of this responsibility to protect the safety of all that dioceses are or will be suspending all public Masses. Our churches will be open for additional time during this period to allow for individual visits to the Blessed Sacrament and prayer.

The strongest antidote to fear in this moment lies in our understanding that the core issue for us as people of faith lies in confronting the question that the Israelites posed in today's reading from Exodus: "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" And thus, our observance of Lent this year provides the most illuminating possible backdrop for the burdens that each one of us -- individually, collectively and globally -- will face in the coming weeks. It is the experiences which upend our lives that most powerfully reveal our ultimate dependence on the God who created every blessing which we know in this life and who sustains us in a tender and personal love that knows no bounds.

It is our bond with the suffering Jesus Christ that consoles us with a special strength as we approach Good Friday, amidst coming hardships that may weigh us down. And it is the transformative recognition that Christ has risen from the dead that reveals the overwhelming power of hope for ourselves and for our world.



"Is the Lord in our midst?" Our emphatic "yes" to this question is revealed not merely in an intellectual assent, but in a living conviction that surrounds our personal response to the challenges that lie ahead. That "yes" is the greatest Lenten observance that we can undertake in these days to reflect the core values of our faith and witness in the world. It was the hardships and the faith of the Jewish people during their journey in the desert that formed them into a people. And in these days of challenge for our society and our world, we have the chance and the opportunity to ennoble both our nation and our world by testifying constantly to generosity over selfishness, compassion over callousness, idealism over cynicism, and hope over fear.

*Letter to the People of the
Diocese of San Diego from
Bishop Robert McElroy*