

Lent 3; Year A; Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42
The Rev. Devon Anderson
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There is a 3x5 card tacked to the wall above my desk. On it is a quote from T.S. Eliot that asks, simply, *Where is the Life we have lost in living?* I look at this question every day like a prayer. If you're like me you know how easy it is to be consumed with what it takes just to live – to earn a salary, maybe raise children or help raise grandchildren, plan a vacation, pay bills, organize tax receipts, manage family drama, get to the dentist, and perhaps volunteer somewhere to give something back. And in crazy, surreal times like these past weeks, when our shared reality changes by the hour and the threat of coronavirus looms over us like a circling vulture – it's so easy to be consumed with worry and panic, to try to prepare or stave off and protect ourselves by overconsuming toilet paper and hand sanitizer. It's so easy to hunker down and fix our gaze on the small details and the steps we can take to make us feel like we are in control. *Where is the Life we have lost in living?* It's a good question – because it suggests that there *is* Life that we overlook in our understandable anxiousness. There *is* Life that is deeper, sustaining and peaceful, more reliable that is available to us -- life that lives underneath and around all of our living and deciding and fretting and obsessing. I wonder what that Life is that we sometimes lose in our living?

We can ask the same question as we approach this morning's story from Exodus – the story of Moses striking the rock at Meribah. *Where is the Life* [the Israelites] *have lost in* [their] *living?* God, through Moses, has led the people Israel out from under Pharaoh's grasp, out through the parted Red Sea and into the desert – away from slavery, free. God, through Moses, has kept the people Israel alive in the wilderness with manna from heaven, and with safe camps on the way to the Promised Land. Despite it all, God, through Moses, has kept them together, in community, families and friends, old and young.

But still, the people Israel complain. Still, the people wail and moan and lament. They are uncertain and unstable and fixated. Yes, their old life was excruciatingly awful. But God, through Moses, has brought them new life, new territory, new smells and topography, new rhythms and food, a new future. Though God, leading them through Moses, has come through for them in every conceivable way – still, they don't trust. They can't trust a future they don't know or control. To the people the “not knowing” becomes more powerful than God's promise of deliverance, of God's kind of safety and well-being. The certainties of their old life, no matter how awful, have become preferable to the uncharted life God is offering. The people Israel just can't believe that there's available abundant living underneath the life they've been suffering.

When I was in seminary I spent several months on a program offered through St. George's Anglican College in Jerusalem. During that course we crossed the border into Egypt's Sinai peninsula, led by Bedouin men driving Range Rovers who spent the better part of five days pointing out the desert's sacred sites. We were led to Meribah and retold the story of the people Israel complaining to Moses, “thirsty, oh so thirsty,” they cried. And Moses, with the power of God, striking the rock from which came gushing the purest, coldest, most healing water the people had ever tasted. One of our guides, a geologist, explained to us how water sometimes collects and builds pressure behind mineral deposits that form veins in the kind of desert rocks found at Meribah. So that when struck in just the right way, magic staff or no magic staff, water really does come shooting out. I think his goal was to “make possible” or “make believable” the story of Moses striking the rock at Meribah - that it could only have

meaning if it could be explained scientifically. But in so doing, he kind of missed the point. In our scriptures, it's *always* about looking for what God is telling us underneath the action of the plot. In this moment, I think God calls us out from under the lives that we know and think we can control -- and offers in its place an invitation to a deeper kind of living -- feeding our hunger, quenching our parched throats, offering unconditional love, and healing, and forgiveness, and peace, and epiphanies, and comfort. All around us is God's call to this deeper Life. But can we trust it? Is it dependable? Will God be there if we reach out? Is it true?

I think we want it both ways. We want the comfort and peace and hope and transformation that God is offering -- but with the old benefits. We want inspiration and healing and depth. We want awakening and spiritual knowledge. We want to experience and know the living God. But we want to hold on to what the minutia of our lives offers, too: security, familiar patterns, the illusion of self-reliance and control and protection. As with the Hebrew Scriptures and all through the Gospels we see that following God requires leaving behind old ways, old habits, old history, old patterns, old hurts, old assumptions. In return for following, neither God nor Jesus promise to fix every problem, or every hurt. They promise only fullness, living water, bread of life, salvation and redemption. My friend Sue Moss says that following Jesus is like going into the wilderness -- and going into the wilderness requires that we "give up everything for nothing." And really, this is what Jesus calls us to do -- to give up clinging so tightly to our living that we forfeit the Life he offers, the kind of Life that we cannot anticipate or define. The kind of Life that is only God's to give.

This morning's Gospel is the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. With the woman, a Samaritan, an untouchable, Jesus has his longest conversation with any single person in all four Gospels. In turn, the woman is the first person to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Their interchange is the same circle as the stories in Hebrew Scripture -- this time God calls out through Jesus -- if you can look up, if you can put your hand out and take it, if you can make room for something new and unexpected and beyond your control or imagining Jesus tells the woman -- God will deliver unending, bountiful, graceful sustenance, the kind of which your heart will never go wanting again. Jesus makes a promise but following will require trust, her leaving behind the old ways and striking out into a new way, with a new grounding, heading in a new direction.

In these strange and fraught days of quarantines and social distancing, I wonder: what is the Life we can claim, or at least be open to, in our living?

This past week I've been thumbing through my well-worn library of Narnia books by C.S. Lewis. And I came upon this beautiful moment in the second Narnia book, *Prince Caspian*. The four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy are back in Narnia -- and everything is strange and different. Years in Narnia are the equivalent of a few moments in their other life, and though they have been gone from Narnia for a few months, decades and eras have passed there. The castles they had known are covered with vegetation. The trees no longer talk. All of their friends are long gone. There's a new sheriff in town, and new perils to navigate. In one lovely scene, Lucy returns, alone, to the place where she used to meet the lion Aslan. She goes back to that place in order to remember what he taught her, to feel the depth and stability and peace and hope that relationship offered her. She goes back to that place to ground herself, to find her way in a new reality.

This past week has hurled each of us into a new reality. And like Lucy, we are called back to God – back to the places in our hearts where we meet God – to ground ourselves in this moment and find our way in a new reality. We are not cancelling worship at Trinity – just changing the format! We will gather each Sunday to pray, like we always do. And next week I will start an on-line Compline service (the church’s “good-night prayer”) so we can rest in our connection to each other and with God, grounding ourselves in the holy as we navigate our new reality.

One of our most solemn duties as followers of Jesus is to gather in community to break the bread and say the prayers, and in this time and place, attending public worship has become for so many of us the principal means by which we express our discipleship. As followers of Jesus there are many ways to live deeply into the promises we make in our Baptismal vows. I imagine and expect that the days and weeks to come will provide countless ways to make an offering to God in sacrificially caring for each other and for marginalized people in our communities, praying to God in secret, and giving up so many of the comforts upon which we have come to rely and take for granted. We will have chances to be Christ for each other. This week the staff will be talking about how we can facilitate the congregation staying in touch with each other and look after each other, come what may. And I have asked our deacon Chip to seek out opportunities for Trinitarians to show up for people in need in our community. We will all be needed. Stay tuned.

And finally, the Life we can find amidst our living can have something to do with being open to opportunities and new life in the midst of a circumstance we did not choose or want. I wonder, in our days of quarantine and hunkering down, what we might discover about ourselves, and about God? What might we find out about the true nature of our connection to this faith community? Others have wisely noted that in the same fashion that we long to breathe when we hold our breath and we long to eat when we fast from taking a meal, we might find ourselves longing for the gifts that we receive in sharing communion, in connecting each Sunday, in the ministries we enjoy and offer the world. In my mind, I have a vision of us all arriving back at Trinity, hungry and relieved and together, renewed, through peril and experience, in the Life only God can bring. I imagine daffodils and tulips, brass instruments and plastic eggs, and the gathering of grateful, weary travelers, together at last, on an Easter morning when everything is new, all debts forgiven, and all brokenness is healed. Let us be awake and open to the Life we sometimes miss in living, until we are here, hungry and together, whenever our Eastertide arrives.
AMEN.