

Lent 3 March 8, 2026

Last week, scarcely a week into our Season of Lent and in the midst of the Muslim holy fast of Ramadan, our nation began a war in the Middle East, specifically joining with the Israeli Defense Forces to bomb Iran. In the first hours of the war the Supreme Leader of Iran was killed and scores of others died as well, including six service personnel from the United States military. Unfortunately, now a week later the war shows no end in sight. Now many nations from the area have been drawn in and bombs, missiles and drones are taking their deadly toll, the civilian deaths are now well over a thousand including about 175 Iranian elementary school girls. The economic costs are catastrophic as well, nearly a billion dollars a day and an untold cost of the economies of all the world, costs of course, that will fall heaviest on those with the least. Ironically, perhaps the only winner so far is Russia, which has seen its oil revenues take an extraordinary rise to fund its own war on Ukraine. But as Christians, Christians now gathered in the middle of the Holy Season of Lent, we can but lament; lament and confess our collective guilt in the sight of deep seated human evil that unleashes such death and destruction. This human propensity to do evil, the glory with which we wrap the flag around war is completely contrary to the goodness of the God we gather to worship today. We are called into Lent as disciples, to pray deeply and ceaselessly, to read and meditate on God's word and to seek for a change in our lives and the life of the world. May God hear our prayers this day and may we continue as disciples to seek to be the peacemakers God calls us to be in our discipleship.

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, as your Word comes to us this day, may we be empowered by your grace to reach out to others in that love; this we ask in the Name of our savior and friend Jesus. Amen.

As we reach this mid-point in Lent this morning, hearing the reading from Exodus, we find ourselves in the company of the people of Israel during their journey in the wilderness. Perhaps that is a very suitable situation if we think about it for a moment. The people of Israel, "the whole congregation of the Israelites journey(ing) by stages," as the reading put it, spend forty years in the wilderness. For us the Lenten journey is much shorter, of course, only forty days, but symbolically our Lenten forty days of preparation recall the sojourn of the people of Israel, as well as the forty days Moses spends on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God, the forty days Elijah spent on Mount Horeb seeking strength for his prophetic mission and of course, the forty days Jesus spends in the wilderness after his baptism by John in the River Jordan, forty days in which he was both tempted and strengthened in his mission to bring the Good News of God's reign to the people. For the people of Israel, the time of the sojourn in the wilderness begins with their deliverance from the slavery, bondage and tyrannical oppression under Pharaoh in Egypt. From a place in which they had no rights, indeed a place ruled by a

genocidal ruler who sought to wipe them out entirely, from that desperate place, God liberates the people, brings them together and sets them on their journey to freedom. God sustains the people on this journey: today we hear of how God quenches the peoples' thirst with water from the rock at the springs of Massah and Meribah. Later for bread and meat God sends the people manna and quails. The people of Israel, following Moses, leaving the harsh conditions of their slavery and captivity and despite the difficult circumstances of the sojourn in the wilderness, they live in the fullness of God's providence, God's loving gifts to sustain the people for their movement toward freedom. This prepares the people of Israel for where they are headed on this journey: as they come into the land promised to them for their freedom, they come bearing the Law of God, a Law that enjoins them to care for the widow and the orphan, those most at the margins of society with no one to look out for them. The other category of people specifically called out for special care is the aliens living in the land, as it is noted in Leviticus, "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." (19: 34) Learning to live in freedom, learning to rely on God's providence and learning to live in the light of God's Law, it means breaking down the boundaries and barriers between people: as God instructs the people, the experience of oppression teaches us to be open and loving to others. This is an important experience for the people of Israel during the forty years of sojourn in the wilderness and it should be part of our experience during these forty days of our Lenten preparation.

In the Gospel lesson from John this morning, we are given another example of God's call to us to overcome the barriers and artificial boundaries we set up for ourselves. This is a story about difference, but despite the difference it doesn't make a difference! The person who encounters Jesus at the well is a Samaritan and a woman. She comes to the well alone, in the middle of the day, while the custom was for women to come as a group at dawn or in the evening, so I guess the most charitable way to put it is that she there at noon because she is a woman of easy virtue. She acknowledges that she and Jesus are disregarding the social boundaries right away when she responds to Jesus' request for a drink by saying, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" But those distinctions mean nothing to Jesus: he reaches across these social boundaries to show her the fullness of God's love. The disciples, when they return to Jesus, do not get it: they are still bound by the social customs of their day. Jesus knows that reaching over the boundaries, coming to enjoy the fullness of God's love together, this is our call. When the Samaritan woman brings many to see Jesus, when because of her testimony of Jesus reaching out to her, across the social divide to bring God's love that frees her from her past sins, a stunning transformation takes place. This woman of ill repute, one who had probably been shunned and look down upon by her own community, this

woman who was put down and cut off, is now transformed. The spirit of Love in Jesus has touched her with the full power of God. She is a follower, a disciple who also becomes a leader, leading people to Jesus. In her new found freedom, she frees others to cross the social divide with her. Even though, regrettably, we do not even know her name, I think that we can honor her as the first missionary apostle, going out to bring others to Jesus, going out into the community to share the Good News of Jesus and to bring God's reconciling love to others.

In the story of Jesus and this unnamed woman we see the power of God's love clearly. God's love in Jesus reaches across social divisions; God's love shatters the barriers that would keep us apart, God's love ignores the artificial human boundaries that would separate us and brings us together in reconciling action. And God's love transforms us at the same time. Our eyes are opened, our souls are touched, our hearts are warmed and our spirits are strengthened. In the power of this divine love, we are changed, yes you and I, my friends, we are made ready to live into the freedom and fullness of life Jesus brings to us.

As I mentioned at the beginning of these remarks, we are at the halfway point of our Lenten pilgrimage. Symbolically, as we observe the Lenten fast, this is a time when we would be hungering and thirsting, and indeed, both the lesson from Exodus and from John's Gospel treat this issue, because both are about the need for water to slake our thirst; that symbolic thirst we have for righteousness, the thirst for justice and peace in our world as we have engaged in a new war despite the cost and chaos for human life, the thirst for overcoming the boundaries that separate us, that we might be one people brought together for fellowship under one God. As we carry on this Lent, may we live as the disciples of Jesus in an ever deeper thirst for the power of God's love to transform our lives, may we all pray ever more fervently for God's love to help us to overcome the barriers that separate us, may each one of us undertake this call to act and reach our hands out across the boundaries that we can help others to see the glory of God's love for us and for our world. May we, each one of us, continue to support those who are peacemakers with their prayers and in their lives, for those who work for racial justice, and for all who continue to seek the welfare especially of those who are most marginalized in our society. May God who has given us the grace and the will to do these things also grant us the grace, strength and courage to accomplish this work. Thanks be to God for this great grace we know in Jesus our savior. Amen.