

Year A Third Sunday of Lent (Feb. 17, 2008)

Ex 17:3-7; Ps 95; Rom 5:1-2, 5-8; Jn 4:5-42

If in the last two Sundays we focused on biblical eschatology —the Bible’s teaching about the final state of things in the new creation, which corresponds with God’s original creation and his intention then, which went awry through sin— this Sunday the focus is on the in-between time. Two models are offered. The first is from the Book of Exodus: Israel’s journey to the Promised Land was marked by rebellion and complaining, actually “belly-aching,” wanting to go back to slavery in Egypt so that they could return to the food they enjoyed there (Nm 11:5). It is really a rejection of God’s promise (Nm 13:32; 14:27-38), through covetousness (Nm 11:4-6, 34) and lack of faith (Nm 13:25-33; Dt 1:29-46). The prototypical names for this lack of trusting obedience to God is Massah and Meribah, meaning “testing” (putting God to the test) and “dispute” (arguing with God).

Ps 95 is the “invitatory” psalm recited every morning in the Liturgy of the Hours. It exhorts to listen to God and not act as was done in Massah and Meribah. Rather, we should joyfully praise Yahweh and, as Heb 3:7-4:11 says, strive to enter into God’s Sabbath rest, the rest of the new creation, of God’s blissful presence.

This is in accord with the other model, the model offered by life in Christ. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well. This woman may represent the northern, idolatrous kingdom of Israel (whose capital was Samaria). Her five husbands may represent the “ba’als” (meaning “lords” or “husbands”), the idols worshipped so much in that kingdom. This type of sinning had led to the division between the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, and now Samaritans and Jews hated each other and worshipped in different places. It is Jesus who comes to give living water (the Holy Spirit, Jn 7:37-39) which will quench all disordered thirst and give rest (cf. Mt 11:28-30). God’s blissful presence is found in Jesus, and there will no longer be division between the temples in Jerusalem (for Jews) and Mt. Gerizim (for Samaritans). God will be worshipped “in Spirit and truth.”

The reading from Romans is my favorite Bible passage. It speaks of the pledge that we have that we are *in Christ*: that we have received God’s Spirit (2 Cor 1:21-22; Eph 1:13-14; Gal 4:6) of love, which purifies and justifies us so that we have free access to God. This is due to Christ’s unheard of sacrifice for us.