Third Sunday of Lent
March 22-23, 2014

There is a famous quote from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

“Water, water, everywhere, And all the boards did shrink; Water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink.” As the thirsty sailors in the story suffer from a lack of drinkable water, they realize the irony that they are completely surrounded by water, but have not “any drop to drink.”

I recently watched the gripping Robert Redford movie: “*All is Lost*.” In it, Redford struggles because, although surrounded by water on the open sea, there is none for him to drink!

Water is essential to all forms of life. Nothing can exist without it; neither a plant nor an animal, nor even an insect—*nothing*. As a matter of fact, an adult human body is composed up to 60% of water. (I could afford some dehydration!) that might be funny, but we all know people for whom dehydration can be lethal.
With Redford’s movie from modern times in mind, let’s journey back several thousand years to the time of our Old Testament reading from Exodus, …the story taken from the wilderness wandering of the people of Israel. The people are living a Bedouin existence in the Sinai desert, having been delivered by God from Egyptian slavery, but not yet settled in the Promised Land of Palestine. After 450 years of slavery under the Pharaohs, surely the experience of freedom felt exhilarating… at first. It was like a moving family summer camp, … they pitched their tents each day, and picked them up to move to the next camp the following day. Gradually the moves got old, they became bored, and the realities of finding food and drink in such an inhospitable environment set in. Grumbling stomachs quickly led to grumbling attitudes. As the people ran low on their stored provisions, and as the hunger increased, Moses faced a mutiny.

God provided manna, like daily bread delivered to their tent door. That was fine for a while, but yesterday’s miracle quickly becomes today’s expectation. And before long, even though the manna was sufficient for daily nutrient, the people got bored with the same diet. So they want meat
with their manna. So God sent quail into the camp each evening. Again, the Israelites were satisfied …for a short time….

Until the water ran out. And then the mutiny began all over again. In our Scriptures today, the people are thirsty, or at least afraid they will get thirsty soon. Their canteens were running low, and there is no water in sight. Soon the fear swept through the camp, until the hysteria reached a fevered pitch, crying out to Moses that they would rather be back in Egypt than die of thirst in the desert. They accused Moses, and God, of deceiving them with this promise of deliverance, and luring them from the safety of Egypt to this God-forsaken wilderness.

Now they want to go back to Egypt, back to Pharaoh, back to slavery. Apparently it’s better to cling to what was known, than risk the unknown.

Had they so quickly forgotten the misery of slavery in Egypt?

Had they so quickly forgotten the provision of God through the parting of the Red Sea, the manna, and the quail?
Amazing how fear of scarcity can cause dementia! As the Rabbis later said, “It took God only 40 days to get Israel out of Egypt, but it took Him 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel.”

We may be tempted to judge the Israelites too harshly and swiftly. Scarcity and fear can bring out the worse qualities in us. Scarcity of water is surely the most frightening of all. (Within the past few months, ask any resident of Charleston West Virginia!) Humans can survive many days without food, but only a couple of days without water. No wonder the Israelites were alarmed to realize there was no water available in their camp, or within any foreseeable horizon. Would we have reacted any differently, had we been there? Probably not. Ask folks in Charleston, read the news about battles over water rights, as cities like Los Angeles and Phoenix try to support urban sprawl in desert environments, or as farmers squabble over diminishing underground aquifers in the Plains states. We still become quite testy when the water is scarce, or hidden beneath the rock.
Moses felt the fear too, since he could tell that the mob was about to turn on him. So he cried out to the Lord, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.” If it were up to Moses, I bet he would have left the people right there in the desert, and fled for his life. They were ungrateful, mutinous, and forgetful of past mercies. Who could put up with such a stubborn and fickle people?

God could, that’s who. So God told him, and Moses struck the rock, and water gushed forth.

Did that make the people of Israel happy? Well, yes. But the point was not just that God wanted to give them water. He also wanted them to learn from the teachable moment here: that He could be trusted, that He was with them, that He would provide for them. Just as God made our bodies dependent on water for survival, He made our souls dependent on a relationship of trust and love with God. We quickly become parched, and our spirits wither, when we do not quench our thirst for God by returning to the wellspring of His mercy, seeking intimacy and fellowship with Him.
The Samaritan woman is presented in today’s Gospel as the antidote for the lack of faith mentioned in the first reading. She comes to faith and is open to the working of Jesus in her life. Are we? Do we see Jesus as living water who can satisfy all of our spiritual and deep human desires? Or are we like the people in the desert who cry out in fear, forgetting the marvelous works of God already present in our lives?

We are here at this Eucharist today as a people of faith who have come together to remember the saving work of Jesus in our lives. Maybe there have been times we cried out in fear to God, forgetting his love. But today we have the opportunity to allow him to gently lead us to deeper faith and satisfy our every “thirst.” Not the normal thirst (that our ever-present bottles of water quenches!), but the real water of life?

As we prepare ourselves to celebrate the saving events of Holy Week and Easter, let us open our hearts to the living water always being offered to us freely.
As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “Everyone who drinks regular water will thirst again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst, but it will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13). “And let all those who thirst… let them come to the water…”