

**Lent 3                      March 27, 2011**

*Prepared by Alice Hanson – Spirit of Peace United Church, Spirit River*

A Thought for Today:

In our wilderness times, how does God's life-giving water flow in and through us?

The Life and Work of Our Church

We Gather Before God

Lighting the Peace Candle:

We light a light in the name of God, who calls us to embody hope, love our enemies, care for the earth, choose life, and work for peace.

♪ Hymn: God Who Gives to Life Its Goodness Voices United 260 or  
Come Touch Our Hearts *More Voices 12*

Call to Worship:

ONE: People of the Way,  
    arid and winding as life may feel at times,  
    come to this place of God's dwelling,  
    where honest expressions of heart and mind  
    are always honoured.

TWO: Come to the Well-Spring of grace  
    bringing your many questions, concerns,  
    laments, and longings of the heart.

**ALL: In God's embrace,  
    we are welcomed.  
    We are listened to.  
    We are filled with hope  
    and encouraged on our way. Amen.**

Opening Prayer

ONE: God of our journeying,  
God of dead ends, U-turns,  
and radical new beginnings;  
here we gather,  
confident only of  
your attentive and believing love.

TWO: Holy One,  
commune with us.  
Create streams of  
love and kindness within us.  
Amen.

Prayer of Confession:

O God, our prayers often falter  
when we think we need to get it all right  
with every word in its proper place,  
every sentiment correctly stated.

Yet we know life is not like that.  
Our feelings wander,  
our thoughts scatter,  
our motivations are mixed.

Save us from a politeness of faith  
that often shrinks back from the messy soul  
of what it means to be human.  
From these messy places we find  
life-giving desires  
longing to be felt and given voice.

Save us, too, from a sterility of faith  
that, for the sake of precision,  
remains closed to wonderment,  
the facing of hard questions,  
and possibilities of new adventure.

Now, in the deep and hospitable silence,  
enlarge our trust and free our hearts  
to live the generous ways of your love.

(silence)

*Sung Response: Holy Sacred Spirit MV 15*

The Good News:

Friends,  
fashioned from moist clay  
in the creative hands of God,  
befriended within our humanity  
by the flesh and blood Christ,  
and guided into joy  
through the playful presence of Spirit,  
we are loved into life's fullness  
over and over again.

**Thanks be to God. Amen**

*Sung Response: Now the Green Blade Rises Voices United (verse 1,4)*

### Expressions of Gratitude

Thanksgiving for Faith Community

Minute for Mission – our M&S fund at work.

Offering and Hymn Response: You Nourish Us VU 545

Prayer of Dedication:

**As One closer than our breathing,  
and as One knowing  
of our needs before we ask,  
bless the gifts we bring today, O God.  
Through us, use them  
in the love and service of others.**

### We Listen to God's Word in Our Bible Readings and Reflection

Children's Hymn: I am a Child of God MV 157 or Jesus' Hands were Kind Hands VU 570

Children's Moment: Moses, we are thirsty (*insert*)

Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 95 (*insert*)

Like a Rock *More Voices* 92

Exodus 17: 1-7 (*if you have used this story for the children's message you may decide not to reread it*)

The Gospel Reading: John 4: 5-42

The Epistle Reading: Romans 5: 1-11

This is part of our story.

**Thanks be to God.**

Reflection: *Is God among us or not?*

♪ Hymn: As the Deer Pants for the Water *VU 766*

Prayers of the People

Within the inviting and attentive mystery of God,  
let us boldly say:

**We are listening. Journey with us into love.**

Aware of global, human needs  
on massive, mind-numbing scales,  
let us boldly say:

**We are listening. Journey with us into compassion.**  
(silence)

Attuned to the heartache of the earth,  
used and rendered in so many violent ways,  
let us boldly say:

**We are listening. Journey with us into peace.**  
(silence)

Alarmed by growing divides  
between rich and poor,  
yet clinging to our own resources,  
let us boldly say:

**We are listening. Journey with us into justice.**  
(silence)

Dispirited by the energy needed  
to keep the church alive  
and of some bearing within modern society,  
let us boldly say:

**We are listening. Journey with us into faith.**

(silence)

God of shared desire,  
we entrust these prayers and our selves to you  
in the hope of  
love,  
compassion,  
peace,  
justice,  
and faith.

**Amen.**

*The Lord's Prayer* (sung or spoken)

### We Seek God's Blessing

Blessing:

Whether it be on hot desert plains  
or atop fertile, cool mountains,  
the goodness of God satisfies thirsting souls,  
giving courage and grace for the journey.

Friends, go in God's goodness,  
live out of Christ's grace,  
and sing gladly of the Spirit's presence,  
this day and ever more. **Amen.**

♪ Hymn: Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah VU 651

## PSALM 95

*Divide those gathered into two groups and read this paraphrase of the psalm antiphonally OR choose two readers.*

ONE: Draw closer; let us cry out with joy to God!  
Let us acclaim the trustworthy One who saves.

TWO: Boldly we will enter God's presence singing praises,  
lifting our voice with shouts of thanksgiving!

ONE: For God is great,  
above and beyond all living powers;  
In one hand are held deep caves and caverns,  
in the other, peaks of the highest mountains.

TWO: God called the oceans into being,  
God's creative hands shaped the whole earth.

ONE: Therefore, let us gather in right spirit,  
let us fall on our knees before the great Mystery.

TWO: This is our God,  
and we are nurtured and fed by God's grace.

ONE: Listen anew as God speaks:

TWO: "Open your precious hearts!  
Don't be like those who remain cold and listless,  
and who don't believe my saving Presence.  
For over time such fickle behaviour frustrates me  
to the point of wanting to give up;  
no longer able to take my people  
to their journey's end."

## CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

You may choose to move around the worship space with the children as you tell this story, stopping at four different locations to tell a portion of the story and ending up front. Before beginning the story, teach the sung response and invite everyone to join with you when indicated.

Sung response:

(tune: "Ring around the Rosy")

*Moses, we are thirsty.*

*Moses, we are thirsty.*

*Help us, help us,*

*help us now!*

A long, long time ago, Moses was leading some people to a new place - a better place - but to get there they had to travel through rocky, dry land. Moses had a very big problem. He was in the middle of the desert with a group of thirsty people, but he couldn't find any water for them to drink. The people were very cranky. The people said...

Sing: "Moses, We Are Thirsty"

(Move to next location.)

Moses was frustrated. He prayed to God. Moses said, "God, you asked me to lead these people to a new place, a better place, and now they are angry with me. What can I do?" All the while Moses was praying, Moses could hear the people saying...

Sing: "Moses, We Are Thirsty"

(Move to next location.)

God said to Moses, "I will lead you to a big rock. When you are close to the rock, hit it with your walking stick. You will see water, and the people can drink from it." So Moses told the people to follow him because God was going to help them find water. The people followed Moses, but all the while, they kept saying...

Sing: "Moses, We Are Thirsty"

(Move to next location.)

When Moses reached the rock that God had talked about, Moses hit

it with the walking stick. Cold water came pouring over the rock. The people were amazed! They were so happy to see the water. All of the people had enough water to drink, and they thanked God and Moses for helping them. The people said... (Invite those gathered to sing each line after you.)

*Thank you for the water.*

*Thank you for the water.*

*You have helped us.*

*We are glad!*

## **Introduction to Scripture Readings**

The Exodus reading today leads us through the wilderness – an inhospitable and threatening place. The excitement of the escape from Egypt has worn thin as the discomforts of the wilderness lead to questionings and basic needs like water and food. Listen carefully for what Moses does and how God responds.

The Psalm is a song of praise. With the Exodus story in the background, the psalmist reminds us that the Creator gives generously for all our needs. Even in the midst of our complaints and struggles, God is a rock, a shepherd and monarch who is dependable, caring and wise.

John 4, the gospel story today, tells another story of thirst and life-giving water. Even in broken relationships, whether between nations (Jews and Samaritans here), or men and women, or community members, Jesus offers living water for our spirits that lead to restoration and healing.

Throughout the readings, God addresses very expressed needs.

**March 27, 2011   Meditation      *Is the Lord among us or not?***

***Prepared by Alice Hanson – Spirit of Peace United Church, Spirit River***

Thomas Shaw, bishop of Massachusetts, spoke of his experience of being in the Holy Land for Lent. There it is summertime, with the desert in full bloom, the trees laden with olives and figs, the smell of ripe fruit and the sound of buzzing insects filling the air. Through his Lenten days of prayer and reflection, Bishop Shaw came to understand Lent as a time of being refreshed by a loving God instead of a time of arduous effort to improve. What a different experience of Lenten season from ours here in Canada! No call for complaints and winter blahs! Can lent be a time of refreshment, of joy and of renewal?

Lent is a time of mystery, of reflection, sometimes even ashes and sackcloth, mourning and fasting. Seldom do we associate it with joy. But could it be? To discover joy in the midst of struggle though seems out of reach. Yet Psalm 95 speaks about just that possibility. The Psalmist invites us to sing, to make a joyful noise. In the midst of a Lenten journey we are invited to ... praise and give thanks? Yet, isn't this what worship in community is all about as we seek together to lift up our voices, to encourage one another, to walk with each other along the way? Then the Psalmist reminds us why we come with singing - "*For Yahweh is a great God ....in God's hands are the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains ... the sea...the dry land.* For the Psalmist God is the rock of salvation, the One who made us; our very breath comes from God...*the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.* An inner joy seems to be connected with trust and understanding of the very character of our God in all seasons of our living.

However, when spring is close but yet not here, and our patience with the weather spills over into our work places, our irritations spill over into our families and our faith communities, we identify with the Holy lent of sack cloth and ashes. Did you know that the word '*lent*' comes from the Anglo Saxon word that refers to the springtime of the year when the days grow longer and warmer and brighter and we begin to emerge from our protective winter burrows, to stretch our legs and sniff the fresh air for signs of new life. Maybe, that's why a song of praise appears here in our lectionary readings in the midst of lent and the Exodus story of a grumbling people.

Abruptly however, without warning, the tone of the Psalm shifts and the challenge is thrown out. The Hebrew Scriptures often do that! Just when we are comfortable, the tables are turned upside down. Suddenly we move from singing to the call for ears to come and listen and feet to go, to follow. We hear of a people who have hardened their hearts and do not regard God's ways. Echoes of the Exodus story are present as this Psalm draws to a close.

After the euphoria of freedom from the Egyptians, the Hebrews were faced with new daily realities. Our story today in Exodus reveals the reality of wilderness experiences in human lives which do cause protest and dissatisfaction. The Israelites knew the wilderness of inhospitality as a threatening land loomed all around them – they faced need, thirst and yearning that left them restless and angry. In their fruitless search for water, when their needs were not met, they grumbled and quarreled. Their experience in the wilderness led them to question the very foundations of

their faith. Realities of daily life lead us as humans to that same piercing question “*Is Yahweh among us or not?*”

We can understand all of this. We see it in our lives when things go wrong, or in the lives of nations far away as pressing daily needs push them into land conflicts and violence; sometimes we see the struggle in our neighbor right next door as homes break apart after one spouse loses a long-time career and is unemployed for several months. There are pressing needs within our families as we juggle both parents’ working schedules, the children’s activities, as we care for aging parents, as unexpected health issues send us into a tailspin. We understand brokenness and need and like the Hebrew people we too wonder *Where is the oil of renewal?* Struggle seems to take over in the desert of our lives and we feel thirsty and dry, tired and worn out.

We know struggle in our faith communities too when the heating breaks down, the roof needs fixing, and there is one more dump of snow and we wonder who will handle all the shoveling. The realities of our aging congregations and our younger people preoccupied with work and family leaves us all grumbling! We turn inward as a faith community as depression takes over or maybe outward and complain about those we have known for years. Like the Hebrew people, we lose our sense of purpose, our reason for being. We wonder how we are to live out the gospel in our lives, our homes, our churches, our towns, our schools, our places of work. Encouraging and walking well with each other becomes very hard to do; praise even more so.

Where are the signs of renewal, the gifts of a true spring in the winter of our

discontent, in the midst of very legitimate issues? *Is the Lord among us or not? Where will we find water in the rocky soil of our lives?*

Moses turned to God in the midst of the struggle and he directed the people to do the same. His prayer as a cry of frustration came in plain simple words of truth telling: *What am I to do? What are we to do?* Prayer is a powerful place where God and the human being can meet in total truth. The answer was obvious to God even if it had eluded the people! God directed Moses to the gifts he had been given – the people, the elders – his staff – He is told to strike a rock and discover the answer to their need - life-giving water - in the most unlikely places and then Yahweh reminded him that *I will be standing there in front of you.* Moses was reminded that he possessed the tools to solve his problems and the problems of his people. God seems to be saying to us *Just look around – see the possibilities that lie within us and all around us. Stop grumbling and do something – Go!* And don't forget: *I will be your rock! I am standing among you!* It is seems so straightforward: Moses obeys. Yahweh delivers. Water comes. Israel drinks and the crises is over. Life comes in anxious times through deep trust.

Testing, proving, challenging, doubting God are part of our life experience. If God comes through then God must be among us! Lenten times, however call on us to let go of guarantees and trust even in the difficult times. We are called to trust that God's creative Spirit is present in the lives of God's beloved people; as we remain God's faithful people in the midst of our struggle there is rebirth. As we stumble along, even when God seems hard to see, we are invited to offer prayer and praise. We are called to be listeners

for one another in our struggles, knowing that we see only in a mirror dimly and we hear with imperfect ears yet God with abundant grace is present among us as the Christ, able to forgive, to lift us up and to call us once more along this journey together toward Resurrection.

Our hope lies in God's love that stands in front of us, that works within us. We have been gifted with what is needed for our journey. As we listen and respond to God's *come* and then God's *go on* the beauty and plenty of the Promised Land awaits us. As Rev. Doug Wright witnessed (Observer, March 2011) after a rural United Church was destroyed by arson and subsequently rebuilt "*Wondrous things happen as we seek to remain God's faithful people in the midst of our exile*".