

Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

Grace to you and peace, from the God who gives us birth, from the One who sustains our lives. Amen.

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust and Auschwitz as well as one of the profound writers of our time, once said of the last half century, “Remember, I belong to a generation that has not learned the way to live, but learned that there are a thousand ways of dying...”

There’s been a lot in my life lately about learning to live. There’s something about being present at the birth of one’s child that has a way of teaching you a new way to live.

It was a week ago Thursday that the story begins. Elisabeth woke up early Valentine’s Day morning with the earliest feelings and signs of labor. The signs increased throughout the day and by the late afternoon and early evening, the contractions were about five minutes apart and getting consistently stronger.

By about ten in the evening we made the decision that it was time to make the hour’s drive to the hospital. We checked in at eleven and still the contractions continued to get stronger. A couple hours of breathing, working hard at relaxing, and about forty-five of the most intense minutes of my life – I would imagine of Elisabeth’s life as well! – and a baby boy, Elijah came screaming alive into this world.

And so, we’ve learned a new way to live, despite knowing at least a thousand ways of dying.

Arguably one of the most important things for life is *water*. And, it flows throughout our readings for today. In the first reading, the Israelites quarrel with God about being led out into the wilderness. Thirsting for water, a familiar question hangs on the roof of their mouths, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” They were searching desperately for a way to live, but were no stranger to the thousands of ways of dying.

And like a stream of living water flowing just underneath the earth's surface, as much as a real thirst of water haunts their thoughts, the narrator of Exodus reminds us that flowing underneath their story is a theological question of life and death: "Is the LORD – is the *LIVING GOD* – among us or not?"

Sometimes we have clear answers to this question. *Clear answers*, like crystal clear water flowing mysteriously out of a rock. But sometimes we sit by the well, like Jesus and the Samaritan woman, with that thirsting question harsh on our lips: "Is the *LIVING GOD* among us or not?"

Elisabeth and I received word this week of friends who gave birth 30 weeks into their pregnancy, only to have their child quickly die. And underneath it, we had to ask a question... for us, particularly for them, the question flows... *Is the LIVING GOD among us or not?*

And I can think of at least a half dozen other close friends who have had to deal with that most bitter of grief to deal with – a grief I'm only barely beginning to appreciate now that I have a son of my own. The grief of losing a child.

It does seem there are at least a thousand ways of dying, but how difficult it is to learn a way to live.

The longest conversation Jesus has with any person in the bible is in our reading from John for today. A Samaritan woman who thirsts for clean, healthy drinking water like many still do in our world today. And Jesus (a Judean) sits with her at the well – a Judean and a Samaritan conversing. Like a Palestinian and an Israeli having lunch? Like a member of Al-Qaeda and a U.S. marine sitting down for morning coffee?

And the conversation ebbs and flows between talk about thirsting for *clean, healthy drinking water* and a *Living Water*. We might say, between the *nourishment of the body* and the *sustenance of the soul*. Between the question of why it sometimes seems that God has brought us out into the wilderness to die of thirst and the question that flows underneath those experiences, *Is the LIVING GOD among us or not?*

The contrast between the two questions is summed up with one question: “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?” asks the Samaritan woman.

And for Jesus in this story, it is all about belief – it is all about that question “Is the Living God among us or not?” And Jesus works through, works with the Samaritan woman’s questions, and pushes her down below the surface to the question that underlies all her questions. Jesus wants her to believe – Jesus wants her to *trust* that ***Yes, the Living God is among us!***

But Jesus knows that it sometimes takes so long in the wilderness, much suffering before we ever even whisper our belief that indeed a Living God is among us. It is a long process as Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans... because “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

We’ve often heard it said that God helps those who help themselves. But Paul tells a different tale. “For while we were still weak,” writes Paul, “at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

In the middle of the wilderness, in the middle of our suffering, in the middle of our laboring to find a way to live even with thousands of ways of dying enclosing in around us... at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. At the right time Jesus lowers the bucket into the well of Living Waters, hoists it up and sustains our bodies, our souls... our very lives.

One of the things Elisabeth tells from her experience of giving labor which surprised her the most is how involuntary it was to push Elijah into this world of the living. It was like her body knew exactly what to do as wave after wave of contractions rippled through her, pushing Elijah down the birth canal, pushing Elijah towards life. If she had *any* choice, the only choice she had was to fully *give-in* to allowing her body to do what it knew with every fiber of its being how to do.

I think that finding a *way to live* in the midst of the thousands of ways of dying which surround us everyday... I think that finding a *way to believe* in the midst of the thousands of reasons to ask that question in all

seriousness, *Is the Living God among us?* I think that finding a way to live and finding a way to believe is not unlike this experience of giving birth.

If we have *any* choice at all, it is only to allow God to work through our lives, *trusting* that where there seems to be no way out of the wilderness alive... that God will bring living water to sustain us for the journey. *Trusting* that even when it seems we're learning another one of the thousand ways of dying, somehow we're learning as well a way to live. *Trusting* that in and through our pain, *we are being delivered and a new way of living is coming.*

To me this is what it means to believe. To desperately give ourselves with every fiber of our being to the trust that life is somehow unfolding as it should be, even as we wander through the wilderness with dry mouths, with haunting questions.

So that when God's good time comes, as it did for Elisabeth and I just over a week ago with the birth of Elijah, we might answer that question *Is the Living God among us?* ...with a still, small whisper of an affirmation: Yes. The Living God is among us... *This Living God who gives us birth IS among us and continues to sustain our lives with living waters of grace and peace.*

Amen.