

## The Third Sunday of Lent

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is merciful and gracious
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 103: 1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 9:28b-36

The third Sunday of Lent for year C takes us again to a very famous passage from St. Paul’s letters. In this case, it takes us to his letter to the Corinthians — his first letter to the Corinthians — and the famous passage where he describes the exodus from Egypt and the rock that followed the Israelites in the wilderness.

So let’s take a look at that passage together. The reading here is 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, and then it skips down to verse 12. I’m just going to read the whole thing for you, so that you can get the full context of Paul’s writing. This is what he says:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance.” We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents; nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were

written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, what's going on here? So much; it's so good. This is such a fascinating passage. So this is Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. So remember, the Corinthians — like many other congregations that Paul founded — was a Church that was founded by Paul in a city of predominantly Greek, predominantly Gentile inhabitants, that Paul nurtured and then had to depart from for various reasons.... and then writes back to as a way of checking on them, correcting errors, encouraging them to live their Christian faith.

So 1 Corinthians is a letter that Paul wrote to the people of Corinth to address the whole host of problems that were going on. The Church at Corinth is just a mess... is just a mess. And one of the key problems that they're dealing with in the Church at Corinth is, in fact, sexual immorality. Because the immorality that was practiced by pagans and pagan culture was difficult for some Christians to leave behind or to grasp the severity of.

So after discussing a number of different issues involving immorality and other problems in the Church at Corinth with converts from paganism, Paul in chapter 10 goes back to the Jewish Scripture and uses the story of the exodus from Egypt and of the wilderness generation of Israelites — the Israelites who traveled through the desert for 40 years before *not* entering the Promised Land, because all of them died in the wilderness except for two, Joshua and Caleb. It was their children, it was the next generation that actually were able to enter into the Promised Land.

But Paul goes back to the accounts of the exodus in order to warn the Corinthians, to avoid certain sins so that they not be punished like the wilderness generation was at the time of the exodus. So in that context, what Paul is doing is, he's looking back to the Old Testament — and this is important — not merely as containing typological parallels with Jesus that point forward to Jesus and prefigure what's going to happen with Jesus and therefore, in a sense, validate, or

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

prophecy, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scriptures. He does that elsewhere. He does it here too, but he also sees the book of Exodus as a type — as a moral type — that acts as a warning to Christians for what will happen to them if they sin in the way that the fathers at the time of the exodus sinned... if they grumble or complain in the way that the fathers at the time of the wilderness generation complained against God... if they engage in immorality or idolatry in the way that they did.

So in other words, if you look at medieval history of scriptural interpretation, you'll frequently see them talk about different senses of Scripture, one of them would be the allegorical sense or typological sense where one thing in the Old Testament points forward to something in the New Testament — like Adam prefigures Christ or David is a type of Christ.

But another sense of Scripture is what the medieval theologians would call the moral sense of Scripture. And here, you can look at an Old Testament passage and draw out a moral implication from its description of the events that took place, either for virtue to be practiced or vice to be avoided, and that's what Paul is doing here with the story of the exodus. So with that in mind, that's kind of typological reading of Exodus, go back and let's unpack what he said. So he says:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...

Alright, pause there. What is he talking about, they “were all under the cloud”? He means that they all journeyed under the power and authority of the *shekinah*, the glory cloud, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, that led the Israelites in the book of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, for 40 years throughout the wilderness to bring them to the Promised Land. So that's what he means when he says they're all under the cloud — it's a reference to the glory cloud. He says they “all passed through the sea” — that's the crossing of the Red Sea. And then he uses this fascinating image. He says they were all “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea”. Now that's a weird thing to say, because it

makes it sound like they were part of the body of Moses. What does it mean to be baptized into Moses?

Clearly, Paul is talking about the Israelites at the time of Exodus being led by the cloud and passing through the water. But for him, the crossing of the Red Sea and the following of the glory cloud isn't just a historical event that happened at the time of Moses. It also is a mystery, a type that points forward to the fact that now, those who are in Christ are baptized through water and the Spirit, water and the Holy Spirit. But he projects that backward into the time of Moses as they "were baptized into Moses".

So in other words, what Paul sees in the story of Exodus are prefigurations of the sacraments — in this case, the Sacrament of Baptism. In a real sense, it's almost as if he thinks just — actually, it isn't *almost* as if, I think he's implying — that just as you are baptized into Christ in the New Testament and become a member of the body of Christ, in some mysterious way, the Israelites were baptized into Moses and became part of the body of Moses. They came under the protection of Moses. They belonged to Moses in a way that points forward to how we will belong to Christ in the new covenant.

Anyway, anyway...ok. But that's not the only sacrament — not just Baptism. In the next verse, he says the Israelites:

... all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink.

Now, this translation of supernatural is okay, but the Greek is actually *pneumatikon*. It just means "spiritual" — so they ate the same spiritual food and they drank the same spiritual drink. Now what's that a reference to? Well, this is a reference to the two miracles — the miracle of the manna from Heaven that they ate every day during the wilderness and the miracle of the water from the rock that they drank while they were in the desert. So if you go back to the book of Exodus 17, for example, you'll recall that the people are starting to be thirsty and complain. And so Moses is commanded by God to strike the rock at Massah/Meribah and water would flow forth from the rock so people could drink.

Now, just on a level of physics, as a rule, if you strike rock, usually water doesn't come out of it. So this is a miracle, so they see this as miraculous food from Heaven and miraculous drink from the rock. So what Paul... when he says spiritual here, he doesn't mean that the manna wasn't real manna and the water wasn't real water. He's using it to describe that they are miraculous... or as the RSV translates pretty well, supernatural food and supernatural drink. Okay, manna from Heaven, water from the rock.

Now again, though, think about it for a second. If the water of the Red Sea points forward to Baptism for Paul, then what might the spiritual food and spiritual drink be types of? And he doesn't draw this out. He doesn't make what is implicit explicit, but subsequent interpreters of Paul are going to see in this a prefiguration of the Eucharist — the spiritual food and the spiritual drink of the Lord's Supper, of His Body and Blood under the appearance of bread and wine.

So in any case, that's kind of a beautiful convergence here of both typology and sacramental theology on Paul's part. So he's describing the Exodus generation, and he says something fascinating here. He says:

For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:4b)

Now, what you might be wondering, though, is... what does he mean "from the supernatural Rock that followed them"? Well, in order to understand this, you actually have to go back to the book of Numbers. It's chapter 20 where Moses strikes the rock for a second time and brings water to the Israelites.

Although, nowadays, we don't know the Old Testament perhaps as well as we should like. In ancient times and especially at St. Paul's time, they read it very carefully. And one of the things they noticed was that Moses strikes the rock in Exodus 17 and water comes forth. And then in Numbers chapter 20, after they've been traveling in the wilderness for a long time, he strikes the rock again and water comes forth. So ancient Jewish interpreters, one of the things they argued was that

it wasn't just the water that was miraculous; it was the rock itself, that the rock followed them throughout the wilderness.

Now different people imagine this in different ways. It's not that... you don't have to necessarily conceptualize it as this giant boulder that's kind of rolling around behind the Israelites so that they can have water wherever they go. But what Paul means more likely here is that it's the same supernatural source in Exodus 17 as it is in Numbers 20 — that it's God miraculously providing supernatural drink from Him and that there's an actual identity between the rock at the beginning of the exodus (in Exodus 17) and the rock that followed them throughout the wilderness to provide the stream of water. And that is that the rock was, in fact, a type of Christ. So the rock is Christ.

So you can see Paul here is reading the Old Testament, reading Jewish Scripture, in a remarkably explicit and powerfully typological way. He does not see the events of the exodus as merely history. It's not just Jewish history. It's not like Josephus. So when Josephus writes his famous Jewish *Antiquities*, he's recounting the history of Israel from creation all the way up to his own day in the first century. But when Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians 10, he sees that history as also a mystery that points beyond itself, ultimately to the mystery of Christ, the mystery of the Church, and the mystery of the sacraments — Baptism and the Eucharist.

Now, once Paul has established this typological reading and frankly, probably gotten some of the Corinthians excited — “Wow, look at this, it's all these different types and prefigurations. This points forward to what we're doing when we were baptized. This points forward to what we're doing when we celebrate the Lord's Supper and eat His Body and drink His blood.” Like in 1 Corinthians 10 and then 11, he's going to go on to describe the Eucharist.

So as they get excited about that or they respond positively, no sooner has he done that, that Paul says:

Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. (1 Corinthians 10:5)

And now he shifts gears and says, let's look at how the wilderness generation failed because of their sin. And he says:

Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. (1 Corinthians 10:6)

And he lists three events here. First, he says they committed idolatry — and this is a reference to the golden calf. In Exodus 32, we recall Moses goes up the mountain, and while he's up at the top of the mountain, the Israelites make a calf out of gold and they worship it as god. So strike one — they commit idolatry.

Strike two — he also says:

We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. (1 Corinthians 10:8)

And the Greek word for “immorality” there is *porneia*; it means sexual immorality. And this is likely an allusion to the story of the adultery committed by the sons of Israel (the Israelites) with the daughters of Moab. We won't go into details here, but this involved the kind of pagan immorality that also appears in the Church at Corinth and elsewhere in pagan festivals.

So, idolatry and sexual immorality leads to God punishing the people of Israel in the wilderness, so that twenty-three thousand of them fall in a single day. And then finally, although it's not in the reading for today as explicitly, it also describes how some of them put the Lord to the test and were destroyed by serpents and grumbled:

... as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.

Now this is fascinating. There are a couple of cases in the Old Testament. You can look this up yourself and take some time to read them. In Numbers 14 and then in Numbers 21 where the Israelites are described as grumbling — grumbling against God, grumbling against Moses, and complaining, saying “You brought us out in the desert to kill us”... and then also in Numbers 21, grumbling about the manna.

They complain about the manna. “We’re sick of this worthless food” is what they said:

... we loathe this worthless food.

So they’re complaining about... I was going to say church leaders, and they’re complaining about the sacraments. So they’re complaining about the authorities that have been set over them, and they’re complaining about this miraculous bread that they’ve been given.

And this does not go well... this does not go well, because not only are they struck down in the wilderness, but when they complain about the manna, serpents come among them and bite them, and many, many of them die; they perish. But when they complain about Moses, and they complain about the leaders bringing them out of the desert into the... bringing them out of Egypt into the desert to die, when they accuse Moses of willing their death, God actually punished them and said, you will have what you declare:

For the LORD had said of them, “They shall die in the wilderness.” (Numbers 26:65a)

... and your generation will not make it into the Promised Land. A punishment comes upon them for complaining against Moses and against God, and they end up dying in the wilderness. And that’s why they’re often called the wilderness generation. It’s not only because they lived in the wilderness and they traveled in the wilderness for forty years — it’s because they don’t make it into the Promised Land. The only two of the original exodus generation to make it in the Promised Land are Joshua and Caleb. Even Moses dies outside of the land.

Alright... so this is sobering, because what Paul is trying to say to the Corinthians is... it’s in verse 11 is the key:

Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come.



Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:11-12)

What does Paul mean there? He's warning the Corinthians against the sin of presumption. In other words, God miraculously delivered the Israelites. They passed through the water of the Red Sea. They ate supernatural food, they drank supernatural drink. But you know what? They didn't make it to the Promised Land. They died in the wilderness.

Therefore, if any of *you* thinks, just because he's been baptized into the waters of Christ and just because he eats the supernatural food of the Eucharist and drinks the supernatural drink of the Eucharist that you are necessarily going to make it into the heavenly Promised Land, you've got another thing coming.

Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12)

Because you can't be baptized and partake of the spiritual food and drink of the Eucharist and practice idolatry. You can't go down to the temple at Corinth and sacrifice to one of the gods and goddesses. You also can't practice sexual immorality. You can't engage in the kind of immorality that pagans were known for, especially in their various cultic celebrations.

And number three — this is important — you can't grumble. Don't complain like they did against God, against your leaders. Don't complain about the meal you participate in, the sacraments. Well, we use the word sacraments; he didn't use that. Don't grumble, because those who grumbled were struck down and they didn't make it in.

So he's going through various sins — which by the way, you might think, what's the big deal with complaining? Well, it depends on what you are complaining about, because to complain against God is a form of blasphemy. Blasphemy is one of the commandments, right? And in fact... well, at the risk of going into too much detail here, to curse the leaders of the people was also a kind of blasphemy, because the priesthood and the high priesthood was sacred. To speak in a profane

way about sacred things is a kind of blasphemy. It's very serious, the complaining. The Greek word for "complaining" is *gongusmos* — "grumbling". You'll see Jesus uses it in the Gospels when He gives a teaching on the Eucharist. In John 6, guess what word He uses? It says they grumbled about what He said when He said:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you..."

They grumbled about it. And here, let me make sure... you might be thinking, "You sure, Dr. Pitre?" Let me show you; I'll give you the verse so that you can find it. When Jesus says that He's the bread from Heaven, in John chapter 6:41, it says:

The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven."

And the Greek word there is the same, *gongusmos*. They murmured, they complained, they grumbled. And Jesus, what does He say to them?

Jesus answered them, "Do not [grumble] among yourselves.

Verse 43 — do not murmur. So there, when Jesus gives the teaching on the Eucharist, the Jewish leaders who are listening to Him start to complain just like the wilderness generation complained about the manna. So don't complain. So don't speak evil of the sacraments. It's not a good idea, especially the Eucharist.

Okay, so Paul is using this typology to warn the Corinthians against the sin of presumption, against the sin of idolatry, against the sin of *porneia* (immorality), and against the sin of complaining, otherwise they'll fall as well.

Alright, fascinating. So what can we take from this? Let me draw two implications. First, most people think, "Well, you know, I'm a good person. I haven't worshiped any cows, I haven't committed any idolatry. I try to live a life of chastity." That's good, that's good. Those are important. But it's interesting to note that we tend to forget that the sin of complaining is one of the major sins that is actually forbidden in the New Testament and in the tradition.

So for example, if you turn to the apostolic Fathers... this is an ancient document, it was the *Didache* — it's a first century Christian document. And it actually says:

My child, *do not be a grumbler* (Greek *gongusos*), since it leads to blasphemy.<sup>2</sup>

So complaining is just one step away from blasphemy. And for this reason, St. Benedict in his famous rule, *Rule of St. Benedict* — which I highly recommend you read — actually has all these lists of good works, the kinds of things he expects the monks to do, and one of them is not to be a grumbler:

...one of the key “instruments of good works” is “not” to be “a grumbler” (Latin *non murmuriosum*).<sup>3</sup>

It's the *Rule of Benedict*, chapter 4, verse 1 and verse 39. *Non murmuriosum* — no murmuring among the monks, because murmuring is a sin. Complaining is a sin. And it's a sin that belongs to the category of blasphemy and can also lead to blasphemy. And if it's complaining against God, it *is* blasphemy.

So very significant point there that I think, at least for me, I wasn't really aware of until I started to really delve into some of the ancient Church Fathers and their writings and their commentaries on 1 Corinthians 10.

This one other element from the tradition I'd like to highlight here — St. Ambrose, a famous 4th century Church Father. He wrote a beautiful treatise *On the Sacraments*, on the mysteries. If you ever want to get a sense of what ancient Latin-speaking Christians believed about the sacraments, St. Ambrose's treatise here *On the Sacraments* is a great place to start.

And in his treatise *On the Sacraments*, he actually takes this very passage from 1 Corinthians 10, and he uses it to catechize people about the mystery of the

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<sup>2</sup> Didache 3:6. Trans. M. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 349

<sup>3</sup> *Rule of Benedict* 4.1, 39

Eucharist. So let me just end with what St. Ambrose says here. This is beautiful, fascinating. Listen to what he says:

What do we learn from the type which was prefigured in the time of Moses? That when the people of the Jews thirsted and murmured because they had no water God bade Moses strike the rock with his rod. He struck the rock and the rock poured forth a flood of water, as the Apostle says...

And the apostle is always Paul:

“They drank of that spiritual rock which followed them; and that Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). Do you also drink, that Christ may follow you. You see the mystery. Moses is the prophet; the rod is the word of God. The priest strikes the rock with the word of God: the water flows and the people of God drink. And the priest touches the cup, waters streams into the cup, springing up to eternal life.<sup>4</sup>

Wow, so this is totally awesome; this is such a powerful quote, especially if you go back and you press into it a little bit more. Because what St. Ambrose is recognizing here is that if the rock is a type of Christ, then Moses and his rod is a type of the priest. And just as Moses has to strike the rock with his rod in order for the water to flow forth from the rock, so too in the sacrament, what the priest does is he, so to speak, strikes the rock of Christ with his word, and that’s how the bread and the wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. It’s only through the power of his word that the miracle of the Eucharist is able to take place.

And at least for me, this is super powerful — I know that’s not very eloquent, super powerful. But it was the first time I realized this, because I was teaching through the Old Testament and it hadn’t dawned on me before. But if you read the narrative carefully, you’ll notice that in the first occasion in Exodus 17, God actually commands Moses to strike the rock so that the water can flow forth. But when you get to the second occurrence in Numbers 20, God says to Moses, “Speak to the rock so that the water will flow forth.” And what Moses does is in his anger,

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<sup>4</sup> Saint Ambrose, *On the Sacraments* 5:1. Trans. J. Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality*, 194

he strikes the rock multiple times. And because he strikes the rock, God tells him, “You’re going to die outside the Promised Land. You’re not going to make it in.”

And I always remember thinking, “Golly, it seems a little overly harsh. Why does God sentence Moses to death outside the Promised Land for doing exactly what He commanded him to do in Exodus 17?” And there isn’t really any answer to that on the level of the Hebrew text itself... although it does say that because of his lack of belief. So there was something Moses apparently didn’t believe, that simply speaking to the rock was enough to make the water flow forth. And therefore, he’s punished for his lack of belief.

But there’s another element that the Church Fathers highlight, which is that — and you can see it with the sacramental imagery — if the rock is Christ, then the first time the water flows forth, that’s a prefiguration of the crucifixion, when Christ is struck by the sword (the lance of the soldier), what flows forth? Water and blood from His side. But Christ is only struck once. He’s only crucified once. And after that in Numbers 20, when Moses (who represents the priests) wants the rock to bring forth water, he doesn’t have to strike it; he only needs to say the word.

So in a sense, in his anger and lack of faith, Moses messes up God’s typology of the Eucharist. And as a result, he dies outside of the Promised Land as well. He dies in the wilderness. So what St. Ambrose... now that’s just... just sharing that with you, but what *is* absolutely clear is what St. Ambrose is showing here, is that since ancient times, Christians have recognized that the striking of the rock and the flow of the water in the book of Exodus and the book of Numbers are prefigurations of the Eucharist.

And Paul is recognizing that as well. It’s why he’s warning the Corinthians, and through the Corinthians, warning us today — especially as we prepare for Easter, especially for catechumens preparing to receive the Eucharist for the first time. Don’t think, don’t fall prey to the presumption that just because you’re baptized and you receive the sacraments, you’re necessarily going to make it into the Promised Land. We also have to live in accordance with the teachings of Christ. We have to avoid idolatry, avoid immorality, and even avoid complaining, so that

we too — like Joshua and Caleb — might one day enter into that heavenly Promised Land.