



Third Sunday of Lent, March 2026

Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner

[Exodus 17:1-7](#)

[Psalm 95](#)

[Romans 5:1-11](#)

[John 4:5-42](#)

Oh God, source of all and lover of all, keep us from indifference. Keep us from uncaring. Keep us from walking away. Keep us from losing heart and giving up. Keep us coming to the table. Whether we praise or rage, hear us. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Good morning, friends of God. If you are here, you are not indifferent. Whether you are praising God or raging at God or have an ongoing wrestling match with God or are abiding easily with God, you are in relationship with God.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, who lived in the 300s, left a deep impact on followers of Jesus in his time and for all the centuries to come. He said, “The one thing truly worthwhile is becoming God’s friend.” He wrote this and came to this conclusion as he wrote his deep exploration called The Life of Moses. He noted how God spoke to Moses and, as time went on in God’s relationship with Moses and as Moses led the Hebrew people, said, “I have known you more than all others” and was named “friend of God” by God himself.

He concludes his little book with this invitation to the reader: “It is time for you, noble friend, to look to that example and, by transferring to your own life what is contemplated through spiritual interpretation of the things spoken literally, to be known by God and to become his friend. This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because, like slaves, we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some businesslike and contractual arrangement. On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God’s friendship as the only thing dreadful, and we consider becoming God’s friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire. This, as I have said, is the perfection of life.”

Becoming a friend means entering into someone else’s life and staying connected with someone else’s life – and it means opening yourself to share your life and allow your own life to be connected intimately with someone else.

Friends – whether family, or neighbors, or colleagues, or teammates – friends hold each other in shared affection, trust, intimacy, and, in time, commitment. We have levels of friendships, of course, in our lives. And some of us are better than others at sustaining and continuing friendships.

I want to speak with you today about friendship with God and opening the doors of friendship with others. Because I want to speak with you today about the long and steady work of making and keeping peace, and the importance of opening the doors of relationship-building. Even as we face the grim realities of the world. Let's face it. Our hearts are heavy from many things in our world and in this nation. There is a continuing shadow of gloom and uncertainty about things like inflation, employment, housing costs, healthcare, and safety. And now, our hearts are heavy with new warfare and military operations involving our nation against other nations, just in the past week.

In the midst of this, we welcome good news of peaceful resolutions. I shared this good news with you in my weekly meditation on Friday. Here in our region, the Coeur d'Alene Tribal Nation and the State of Idaho have signed a historic agreement on water rights. This agreement brings to a good conclusion ten years of negotiations and lawsuits. It guarantees the Tribe steady and strong water supply while also protecting Lake Coeur d'Alene and ensuring existing water rights for communities in the Lake's region. There were over 300 stakeholders involved in these negotiations. And there were many difficult disagreements and compromises. But this agreement reached fruition. And it will bear fruit and help ensure some security for all into the future.

Agreements can be reached. Solutions can be found. Sometimes it seems like they will take forever, they are out of reach, they are always being blocked by new objections and old festering hostilities. But they can be reached – when people continue to come to the table and insist on finding a way forward. Yes, there may be fights and contests, disagreements and arguments, along the way. But the key is to keep showing up and seeking a way forward.

And the way forward is by entering relationship with people – even when we disagree with them and are in contest with them over something important. Even something as absolutely important and essential to life as water.

This Sunday, we hear two stories from scripture involving water. The first is when the people of Israel, refugees fleeing slavery in Egypt, were trying to find their way forward through years in wilderness territory. They set up camp for a while in a place called Rephidim. There was no water. The people complained and demanded water. Moses, thin on patience after leading them this far, told them to stop complaining. As their thirst grew more dangerous and their need for water became a crisis, the people pressed Moses and accused him of leading them to a place of death. Moses then brought their appeal to God, saying he was afraid of their anger with him. God ordered Moses to strike a specific rock formation with his staff. Water came springing out from the rock and the ground around it.

The second story is one of my favorites in the Gospels. Jesus is passing through Samaria and sits for a rest at a well famous among Samaritans. It was known as Jacob's well – where, nearly two thousand years earlier, Jacob had come thirsty after his getaway from his violently angry brother, and there met Rachel who drew water for him from the well. As Jesus sat, a Samaritan woman approached to draw water for her household. He asked her for a drink of water. She responds with

concern that he is a Jew asking her, a Samaritan, for water. And here begins one of the most beautiful conversations between two people in the whole Bible. Jesus and she continue in conversation. They “stay at the table” with each other. Jesus opens new paths of meaningful conversation, and she responds. This conversation, at the place of everyone’s water supply in the neighborhood, changes her life. Through her, Jesus opens loving relationship with people that his own tribe considered outcasts and enemies.

Rabbi Anson Laytner said this in an interview about his book, Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition: ‘One of the thrusts of my book is to say to the modern reader, if you have questions about God, you’re not the first to have these questions. What’s important is that you find the place and the vehicle to ask your questions and that you stay involved and engaged. There is another post-Holocaust poet, Aharon Zeitlin, who has a poem that goes something like this: “Praise me,” says God, “I will know that you love me. Curse me,” says God, “I will know that you love me.” Then the poet goes on to say, but if you look at the stars and yawn, if you’re totally indifferent to the world around you, then I’ll know that you don’t care. That’s one of the thrusts of my book. Love and anger are two sides of the coin of the relationship we have with God.’

In our reading from Exodus, we find people tussling with each other and with God. And we have tended to assume that the people of Israel were wrong in complaining to Moses and to God. But their complaints are what made a difference in their situation! The two names that Moses gave this desert place were Massah and Meribah. Massah means testing, provocation. Meribah means strife, contention. Neither of these is necessarily a bad thing. Any relationship has its moments of testing, strife, contention. It is how we approach these moments that makes a difference. If we show up fully and state our tensions and disagreements, and ask for resolution, that is far more productive than withdrawing, pretending the problem doesn’t exist, or staying silent but resentful. I am not so certain about the Psalmist’s interpretation of this situation of desperation in the wilderness and the people’s complaint. It’s a good thing that other Psalms give voice to people’s complaints and frustrations, those moments when people say, “God, where are you? This situation is terrible for me or for us all. Arise, God, and make things right!” We are invited by Jesus to show up persistently with our demands for justice, just like the widow knocked and cried out persistently at the door of the unjust judge’s home.

Coeur d’Alene Tribal Chairman Chief Allan said, “As the late Tribal leader Felix Aripa often said, ‘water is the life of all of us.’ Through hard work and constant dedication, we’ve been able to reach an agreement that not only protects our Tribal homelands but ensures water reliability for everyone throughout North Idaho.”

Water is the life of all of us.

Jesus speaks from the heart of this basic need for water and points us to an even deeper need for what brings life to our spirits. “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The promise of Christ is that our deep thirsts – for wholeness, for freedom from what binds us, for

truth, for peace in the midst of all things, for loving connection with God and others – are filled when we open ourselves to receive what God is offering us, like water springing up from the rock in the midst of what feels barren and dried up all around us.

Who do you seek agreements with? Are you still showing up and coming to the table?

What nourishes and replenishes your heart, soul, mind, and strength? What keeps you from drying up? Are you seeking this life-giving water?

Who around you is thirsty and in need of water? Who around you is drying up? What will nourish and replenish their spirits?

God, bring us all to the table. Let us seek war no more. Let us take the long journey toward making lasting peace. Amen.

Prayer in time of war, concluding our Prayers of the People

O God, listen to the cry that rises from every corner of this fragile earth, from our human family torn by violent conflict:

Give peace in our time, that peace which, as your son Jesus Christ told us and as we have experienced in these days, is a peace which the world cannot give.

To those who have taken up arms in anger or revenge or even in the cause of justice, bring conversion to the path of peaceful dialogue and constructive collaboration.

To the innocent who live in the shadow of war and terror, especially the frightened children, be a shelter and strength, their haven and hope.

To those who have already lost their lives as victims of human cruelty and chemical warfare, open wide your arms and enfold them all in the embrace of your compassion, healing, and everlasting life.

We ask this in the name of your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

(a prayer by Peter Scagnelli)