

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

This week we have an interesting constellation of readings.

At first glance one might think they were all about water, and at one level they are. But like the woman at the well, we must be careful not to remain at the surface.

The water points to something more, much more.

For the desert people of first century Palestine water meant life; it was a rare and precious commodity.

For us in twenty-first century America, who waste more water every day than many people in the world have access to, water has lost much of its power as a symbol. Much, but not all.

If you are an interpreter of dreams you know that when water appears in your dreams it is symbolic of your subconscious.

Lent is our time to move out into deep water.

To plumb the depths of our life and see what's in there.

To ask the hard questions.

As the Hebrews journeyed farther and farther into the desert, and the end of their ordeal moved away from them faster than they could march through the hot sand, the memories of the mighty works of God that freed them from slavery began to fade. They began to doubt.

And they began to ask, "Is the Lord among us, or not?"

It's a good question really. It's an important question.

It's a question that keeps us honest.

It's the question we always seem to ask when things don't seem to be going our way.

We know the answer already; we really do.

It's just harder to believe when things aren't going our way –

when we are suffering.

Suffering has gotten a real bad rap of late. But it really is the best teacher out there.

St. Paul knew it. And he knew why.

“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.”

The Lord is among us always. Always.

But it takes the gift of suffering to reveal that reality.

Suffering that has been lived through and endured.

Suffering that takes the iron of endurance and tempers it to the steel of character.

Suffering that polishes the steel of character to the shining light of hope.

Suffering without purpose is a terrible affliction,

but God’s love for us, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit

has the power to change that affliction to reconciliation.

The power to reveal and reestablish our own awareness

of the intimate relationship between us and God

in a way that nothing else can.

For the Woman at the well,

this revelation of intimacy became the good news she preached to the Samaritans,
a community that had been cut off from and ostracized by the Jews.

“He told me everything I have ever done.”

As often as God breaks into our lives

you would think we would be used to it by now, but we aren’t.

Every time it feels like a new beginning, like being born again.

There is a story going around the internet that speaks to the heart of the matter.

I first heard it over two decades ago, but like a lot of stuff on the internet,

it bubbled up again recently

I don’t know if it is true, but that doesn’t really matter. It’s a good story.

Brian Moore, 17 years old and procrastinating as usual, had only a short time to write something for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting.

It was his turn to lead the discussion, so he sat down and wrote.

“I wowed ‘em,” he later told his father,

“It’s a killer, It’s the bomb. It’s the best thing I ever wrote.” It was also the last.

Brian Moore died May 27, 1997, the day after Memorial Day.

He was driving home from a friend’s house when his car went off the road and struck a utility pole.

He emerged from the wreck unharmed but stepped on a downed power line and was electrocuted.

Brian’s parents were so struck by what he wrote, that they thought it should be shared.

And so, this essay took to the internet where it lives on. It is called...

THE ROOM

In that place between wakefulness and dreams, I found myself in the room.

There were no distinguishing features except for the one wall covered with small index card files.

They were like the ones in libraries that list titles by author or subject in alphabetical order.

But these files, which stretched from floor to ceiling and seemingly endlessly in either direction, had very different headings.

As I drew near the wall of files, the first to catch my attention was one that read “Girls I have liked.”

I opened it and began flipping through the cards.

I quickly shut it, shocked to realize that I recognized the names written on each one.

And then without being told, I knew exactly where I was.

This lifeless room with its small files was a crude catalog system for my life.

Here were written the actions of my every moment, big and small, in a detail my memory couldn’t match.

A sense of wonder and curiosity, coupled with horror, stirred within me as I began randomly opening files and exploring their content. Some brought joy and sweet memories; others a sense of shame and regret so intense that I would look over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching. A file named "Friends" was next to one marked "Friends I have betrayed." The titles ranged from the mundane to the outright weird. "Books I Have Read," "Lies I Have Told," "Comfort I have given," "Jokes I Have Laughed at."

Some were almost hilarious in their exactness: "Things I've yelled at my brothers." Others I couldn't laugh at: "Things I Have Done in My Anger," "Things I Have Muttered Under My Breath at My Parents."

I never ceased to be surprised by the contents. Often there were many more cards than I expected. Sometimes fewer than I hoped. I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the life I had lived. Could it be possible that I had the time in my years to write each of these thousands or even millions of cards? But each card confirmed this truth. Each was written in my own handwriting. Each signed with my signature.

When I pulled out the file marked "Songs I have listened to," I realized the files grew to contain their contents. The cards were packed tightly, and yet after two or three yards, I hadn't found the end of the file. I shut it shamed, not so much by the quality of music but more by the vast time I knew that file represented. When I came to a file marked "Lustful Thoughts," I felt a chill run through my body. I pulled the file out only an inch, not willing to test its size, and drew out a card. I shuddered at its detailed content.

I felt sick to think that such a moment had been recorded.

An almost animal rage broke on me.

One thought dominated my mind, "No one must ever see these cards!

No one must ever see this room! I have to destroy them!"

In insane frenzy I yanked the file out. Its size didn't matter now.

I had to empty it and burn the cards.

But as I took it at one end and began pounding it on the floor,

I could not dislodge a single card. I became desperate and pulled out a card, only to find it as strong as steel when tried to tear it.

Defeated and utterly helpless, I returned the file to its slot.

Leaning my forehead against the wall, I let out a long, self-pitying sigh.

And then I saw it. The title bore "People I Have Shared the Gospel With."

The handle was brighter than those around it, newer, almost unused.

I pulled on it's handle and a small box not more than three inches long

fell into my hands. I could count the cards it contained on one hand.

And then the tears came. I began to weep. Sobs so deep that they hurt.

They started in my stomach and shook through me.

I fell on my knees and cried. I cried out of shame,

from the overwhelming shame of it all.

The rows of file shelves swirled in my tear-filled eyes.

No one must ever, ever know of this room. I must lock it up and hide the key.

But then as I pushed away the tears, I saw Him. No, please, not Him. Not here.

Oh, anyone but Jesus.

I watched helplessly as He began to open the files and read the cards.

I couldn't bear to watch His response.

And in the moments I could bring myself to look at His face,

I saw a sorrow deeper than my own.

He seemed to intuitively go to the worst boxes.

Why did He have to read every one?

Finally He turned and looked at me from across the room.
He looked at me with pity in His eyes. But this was a pity that didn't anger me.
I dropped my head, covered my face with my hands and began to cry again.
He walked over and put His arm around me. He could have said so many things.
But He didn't say a word. He just cried with me.
Then He got up and walked back to the wall of files.
Starting at one end of the room, He took out a file
and, one by one, began to sign His name over mine on each card.
"No!" I shouted rushing to Him.
All I could find to say was, "No, no," as I pulled the card from Him.
His name shouldn't be on these cards.
But there it was, written in red so rich, so dark, so alive.
The name of Jesus covered mine. It was written with His blood.
He gently took the card back. He smiled a sad smile and began to sign the cards.
I don't think I'll ever understand how He did it so quickly,
but the next instant it seemed I heard Him close the last file
and walk back to my side.
He placed His hand on my shoulder and said, "It is finished."
I stood up, and He led me out of the room. There was no lock on its door.
There were still cards to be written.

The goal of the story, the goal of all stories I suppose, is to get you to tell it again.
The internet version tells you to pass it on to people you care about
so that your "People I have shared the Gospel with" file will get larger.
Right up to that point I thought they had got the theology right.
Remember? Jesus signs his name on all the files. Every last one.
The good and the bad. There is no one file with any special power.
"He told me everything I had ever done."
As we prepare for this festival of Easter

