

Third Sunday of Lent – Year A
Fr. Chad S. Green
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
12 March 2023

Scrutiny #1
Exodus 17:3-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8
(John 4:42, 15) John 4:5-42

Scrutiny #1: Samaritan Woman at the Well: Jesus' Initiative

This Sunday and the next two—the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent—we'll be celebrating what's called the Scrutinies of the Elect within Mass. The Gospel Readings for these three Sundays are selected from the Gospel of John: The Samaritan Woman at the Well, The Man Born Blind, and The Raising of Lazarus from the Dead. These three Gospels have long been “used specifically for the preparation of those about to be baptized. [Because] They closely parallel the conversion journey toward baptism and powerfully convey the importance of faith in Christ as the mark of readiness to follow his way.”¹

However, they are meant for all of us. To help all of us deepen our own conversion and readiness to continue following Jesus—and follow Him more closely.

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Last fall, several people came to MQP to inquire about the Catholic faith. They were welcomed into our parish with the Rite of Acceptance. At that point, they became what's called Catechumens—meaning they were being catechized or taught about the Christian faith. Last Saturday, they were presented at the Cathedral and were affirmed in their call to initiation into the Church through Baptism.

Now, in these last few weeks before Easter, they are called the Elect—meaning they've been elected by God. This period of final preparations for them is now called the Period of Purification and Enlightenment. The Scrutinies are part of this time period—not because we are *scrutinizing* the Elect. Rather, it's because we are supporting the Elect with our prayers as they

scrutinize *themselves*. As the instructions for the ritual explain, these three weeks of intense prayer and blessing:

“are meant to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good. For the scrutinies are celebrated in order to deliver the elect from the power of sin and Satan, to protect them against temptation, and to give them strength in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. These rites, therefore, should complete the conversion of the elect and deepen their resolve to hold fast to Christ and to carry out their decision to love God above all.”²

Whenever someone makes the decision of conversion, there’s someone who doesn’t like that. *Who is that person?* Satan doesn’t like it when someone chooses to follow Jesus—or when someone chooses to renew or deepen his or her commitment to following Jesus. Satan will do what he can to prevent that—create obstacles or propose doubts, fears, or questions. That’s why it’s so important for us to surround the Elect with our prayers, in order to drive away Satan. And it’s a blessing for each one of us to be part of that prayer, as we benefit spiritually, as well.

And, when we recognize the purpose, meaning, effect, and power of the Prayer of the Scrutinies, we might very well recognize that we live somewhat vicariously through the elect. Who of us isn’t in need of further deliverance from the power of sin and Satan? Who of us doesn’t need protection against temptation? Who of us isn’t longing for a more complete conversion and deepened resolve to hold fast to Christ and love God above all?

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Therefore, these three weeks are meant to give each of us a boost in our own spiritual battle against evil. Starting today with The Samaritan Woman at the Well. And what I’d like us to notice is the witness that the Samaritan Woman provides for us, that is: Jesus’ initiative in the process.

When I was on my annual retreat last month, on the first evening of the retreat as we were all gathered together, the retreat director reminded us, “Gentlemen, you don’t *do* prayer.”

Prayer isn't something *we* do. It isn't something that comes from our own effort. Prayer is a gift from God. It's something that God initiates and does in us. Yes, we are called and invited to cooperate and respond to God, by making ourselves available to Him.

This is also a lesson taught by Fr. Jacques Philippe in our Lenten gift book from the parish. This is a beautiful and helpful book for encouraging us to do what the title of the book suggests, that is, make *Time for God*. And a reminder to us of the three letters that we use to guide us on making a mini-retreat each day: **TPG**. Which stands for:

Time: Spending at least a few minutes each day.

Place: In a place set apart from the distractions of daily life.

God: To reconnect with God.

Fr. Jacques writes about how regularity is so much more important than expecting—or even trying to force—a particular thing to happen in prayer.³ Prayer, faith, holiness—are like seeds that grow hidden in the earth. The same could be said for vices. We tell what's being sown by the fruits that eventually come from what lies hidden.

Fr. Jacques also wrote the following about God's initiative:

“...it is a matter of God giving himself freely to someone. Even if, as we shall see, there is room for a certain amount of initiative and activity on the human side, the whole edifice of the life of prayer is built on God's initiative and his grace. We must never lose sight of this fact, for one of the permanent and sometimes subtle temptations of the spiritual life is to rely on our efforts and not on God's freely given mercy.”⁴

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We see this in the life of the Samaritan Woman. She went out to the well alone—and Jesus found her there. Precisely in her loneliness. Precisely in a place that she wasn't expecting. Precisely by Jesus' effort and initiative—not by hers. Yet, she was ready. She was open. She cooperated and responded. And it made all the difference.

How does someone go from an outcast, rejected by others, seemingly stuck in sin and wounds from things that she had experienced in her life? To someone who could go back into town and proclaim to everyone what Jesus had done for her?

It's only by Jesus coming to her. And gently uncovering what needs to be uncovered and healed. So that He could strengthen her and bring out all the good that He had put in her from the beginning. Only Jesus can do that. And He wants to do that for each one of you!

The Samaritan Woman is an example of what freedom, joy, and the peace of God looks like. It doesn't come from anything that we manufacture in ourselves; it doesn't come from any self-help program; it doesn't come from any of our accomplishments or even how good we try to be. It also doesn't come from any of the ways that we grasp for comforts, pleasures, or temptations of this world. Those things can produce fleeting or seeming freedom, joy, and peace. But, those things only quench our thirst for a while. We'll soon be thirsty again, and we'll find ourselves going back to those same old wells. It's exhausting. The deepest and enduring kind of freedom, joy, and peace only comes from Jesus Christ.

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As you heard Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman being proclaimed, did you notice what it did to your heart? No need to manufacture or force anything. But, did you notice anything in yourself? Perhaps you could go back and read this Gospel again. This is the opportunity for your own "Scrutiny".

Do you sense the Lord inviting you to bring something to Him for healing—perhaps in the Sacrament of Confession? Do you sense a lightening or joy in your heart at the thought of turning to Jesus? Do you long to allow the Lord to bring the best out of you? Pay attention to that desire. That's the Holy Spirit encouraging you towards freedom!

That's your soul telling you that your thirsty for something different than the world has been able to provide for you. Telling you that your tired of going back to those same wells that leave you thirsty again. Telling you that you're ready for the life-giving water that only Jesus can give!

¹ Diocese of San Jose Ministry News: "Q&A: Can you use Year A readings on the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Sundays of Lent even at Masses without a Scrutiny?"

<https://www.dsj.org/qa-can-you-use-year-a-readings-on-the-3rd-4th-and-5th-sundays-of-lent-even-at-masses-without-a-scrutiny/>

² RCIA No. 141

³ Fr. Jacques Philippe (pp. 12-13):

"Someone who sets out on a life of prayer should aim in the first place at fidelity. What matters is not whether our mental prayer is beautiful, or whether it works, or whether it is enriched by deep thoughts and feelings, but whether it is persevering and faithful. Our first concern, if I may put it that way, should be faithfulness in praying, not the quality of our prayer. The quality will come from fidelity. Time spent faithfully every day in mental prayer that is poor, arid, distracted, and relatively short is worth more, and will be infinitely more fruitful for our progress, than long, ardent spells of mental prayer from time to time, when circumstances make it easy."

⁴ Fr. Jacques Philippe (p. 7)