

Sloane Crosley is the author of a book of humorous essays about disappointment entitled *I Was Told There'd Be Cake*. She once confessed: "Whatever the opposite of seasonal affective disorder is, I have it. I love the winter, especially in Manhattan where the funneled winds dare you to leave your house in the morning. I am dubious of spring's high expectations for renewal, and of summer's pressures; those months when it is commonly considered an infraction to be inside ever. Which is perhaps the reason I have always found solace in Frances Burnett's *The Secret Garden*."

"First published in 1911, *The Secret Garden* is the story of Mary Lennox, a bitter and selfish little girl who hates the world and everyone in it. After she is orphaned by a cholera epidemic in India, she is sent to live with an estranged uncle on his sprawlingly creepy English country estate. When she first arrives, she is pale and thin and sporting a personality that would smell like sour milk if it could. She detests the outdoors."<sup>1</sup>

Today's First Reading tells us that the ancient Israelites, like the little girl in *The Secret Garden*, weren't too keen on the outdoors either. Once again, they angrily blamed Moses for their troubles. Previously, they had griped about the food, accusing Moses of leading them into the desert to starve them to death. Moses had reprimanded them: leaving Egypt wasn't his idea, but God's. So their complaining was really directed against God. Soon God's ongoing care and support was demonstrated when manna and quails were provided.

But now there was no water; again, the people accuse Moses of leading them into the desert to destroy them. The Israelites, too, could be faulted for "sporting a personality that would smell like sour milk if it could." Of course when people are under duress, their attitude may not be at its best.

Even so, Moses was personally offended by their grumbling; this was no picnic for him, either. Moses repeated his allegation that the people's griping actually was an insult to God. They were putting God to the test, demanding proof yet again that God was with them in this journey. This charge against Israel also appears in today's Psalm: "Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the desert. There your ancestors tested me, they

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1 "Darkness and Light in 'The Secret Garden,'" on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," February 20, 2008:  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19204506>.

put me to the test, though they had seen my works.” As Moses in today’s First Reading and as God in the Psalm viewed matters, Israel had a crisis of faith in the desert.

In 1968, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson popularized the notion of the identity crisis in his book *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. Actually, Erikson discussed a lot more than the identity crisis in that book. He viewed human development as a series of crises to be navigated, beginning with the infant’s task of developing basic trust. We might also call this the faith crisis. Faith is not so much about what we believe as it is about whom we trust.

The trust we develop is mostly learned from our parents. Their first job with us is to help us feel safe and secure: to help us know that when we need to be fed or held or cared for in any way, they will be there to meet our needs. If we are fortunate to have good enough parents, we learn to have faith in their love for us and to trust them to care for us.

Today’s First Reading and Psalm share a connection with the temptation of Jesus by the Devil in the wilderness. That was our Gospel two weeks ago. In the second temptation or test, the Devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. When Satan urged Jesus to jump from the top of the temple and rely on the angels to rescue him, Jesus quoted a portion of a verse from Deuteronomy, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”<sup>2</sup> The rest of the verse Jesus quoted reads “as you tested him at Massah.” The Hebrew word Massah means “test,” and Meribah means “quarrel.”

Israel’s putting God to the test shows the people’s mistrust, their lack of faith in God’s ongoing love and care. To address this crisis of faith, God tells Moses to strike a rock with his staff, from which water flows for the people to drink. After that, Moses gives this place where the rock provided water the names Massah and Meribah, which again mean “test” and “quarrel” respectively.

Israel in its wilderness experience tested God and quarreled with God about water. It is very common for people to argue, quarrel and fight among themselves about water since it is so essential to our lives.

Last Monday, the headline in *The Tennessean* was “EPA Cuts Could Be Costly.” The article focused on Lebanon’s need to update its water and wastewater facilities due to the city’s rapid growth. Twenty other communities in the state are planning to make similar infrastructure upgrades and improvements.

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 6:16.

Without adequate support from EPA funding, those projects might become too expensive for these communities to undertake.

The water crisis that began in Flint, Michigan, nearly three years ago has subsided. But residents are still instructed to use bottled or filtered water until all the lead pipes are replaced. That won't happen before 2019.

You may be aware that north Georgia has been experiencing extreme drought conditions. Meanwhile, booming Atlanta's needs for water continue to grow. No wonder Georgia covets the water just above its northern border in the Tennessee River and Nickajack Lake. Georgia lawmakers say a mistake in a survey from 1818 resulted in its northern border being drawn about a mile south of the 35<sup>th</sup> Parallel, where it was supposed to be. So far, Tennessee has not been willing to share its water with our thirsty neighbor to the south. The dispute may eventually go to the Supreme Court.<sup>3</sup>

In today's Gospel, a Samaritan woman quarrels rather playfully with Jesus about water after he asks her for a drink. She is surprised that a Jewish man would even speak to her. This story stands in sharp contrast to the one we heard last week in the preceding chapter of John's Gospel. Nicodemus came to speak with Jesus under the cover of darkness to avoid being seen. But Jesus begins talking to the Samaritan woman in a public place in broad daylight. Yet people's misunderstanding the words of Jesus is a theme common to both stories. When Jesus tells the woman that if she knew who he was, she would be asking him for living water, she points out the obvious: he doesn't even have a bucket! But Jesus isn't talking about water in a physical or literal sense. Jesus has a different kind of water to share.

How much of the time do we live as if we were merely physical beings, focusing almost all of our attention on our physical needs? Of course we need not only water; we also need food, clothing, shelter, health care, insurance, means of transportation, electronics and money to provide these things for ourselves and for others. It is easy to become so focused on our physical needs that we neglect or forget to give enough attention to the things we need spiritually.

Yet even when this happens, God's grace still comes to us: God continues to bring water forth from the dry and rocky places in our lives. This helps us realize that we are not merely physical beings who sometimes have spiritual

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<sup>3</sup> "Florida ruling could have implications in Georgia-Tennessee border dispute," *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, February 26, 2017.

experiences. We also are spiritual beings who in this life are in the midst of a physical, embodied experience. Jesus meets us where we are, nourishing our spiritual thirst and hunger with his own body and blood.

Like Israel in its wilderness journey and like the Samaritan woman Jesus encountered at Jacob's well, our journey of faith can go bumping along in fits and starts. We are called to live a life of radical trust in the providential love of God. It's not easy to maintain that orientation and frame of mind. We may find that our center doesn't hold. Sometimes we may feel ourselves being pulled in a variety of directions.

One reason we come to church is to be reoriented to our center - brought back to the truth of who we are physically and spiritually. In today's Second Reading, St. Paul tells us about ourselves as the people of Christ: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand."

God's grace is freely given every moment of every day. The Holy Spirit gives us faith in Christ, enabling us to be at peace with God, our selves, and one another and to stand in grace.

The living water Christ gives us is the same that he gave the Samaritan woman at the well. First and foremost, it is the revelation of his identity as the Christ, the Messiah. But it also includes our recognizing that we are spiritual beings. This means that physical security, even if we could grasp it, would never be enough for us. Worshiping God in spirit and truth, we recognize the truth that Jesus is the Messiah and receive the gift of the Spirit from him. The Spirit enables us to see ourselves as we are - people claimed by Christ in the living water of baptism. Baptism is a spring of eternal life that nurtures us as we journey in Christ. The Holy Spirit empowers us to follow Christ in trust, in faith.

For sure, there are times when we will relapse. Sometimes fears assail us. But even when they do, Christ continues to bring forth living water from the dry and dusty places in our lives. As we drink from his fountain of eternal life, our faith and our trust in God's steadfast love and care is renewed again and again - all the days of our lives.

