

Saturday in the Fourth Week of Lent

March 20, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Jeremiah 11:18–20; Psalm 7:6–11; Luke 8:15; John 7:37–52

Fourteen days from now, it will be Easter Eve. Men, women, and children worldwide will be born again in the water of baptism to eternal life.

Today's gospel lesson is from the episode in John's narrative that follows the "crisis"—to use Francis Moloney's word in his commentary on John's gospel¹—when Jesus has completed his teaching on the bread of life.

Answering the questions of the Judeans, Jesus said, "My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."² The evangelist writes, "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him."³

Then Jesus asks the twelve, " 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.' "⁴

The narrative continues with the next feast of the Judeans, Tabernacles—tents—booths—the antecedent Sukkōt. It is in the context of this feast that today's gospel lesson is placed. About how this feast would have been celebrated in Jesus' day, Moloney wrote, "It is notoriously difficult to use later rabbinic material to establish first-century practices."⁵ That said, a poem from the prophet Zechariah would have been known to Jesus: "Ask rain from the LORD in the season

¹ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 226–32.

² John 6:55–56.

³ John 6:66.

⁴ John 6:68.

⁵ Moloney, 233.

of the spring rain, from the LORD who makes the storm clouds, who gives showers of rain to you, the vegetation of the field to everyone.”⁶ The note on this poem in the *New Oxford Annotated Revised Standard Version* is titled, “The LORD, the militant shepherd.”⁷

The final chapter of Zechariah speaks of the end of time: “On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter. And the LORD will become king over all the earth.”⁸

Jesus has already encountered the Samaritan woman (a gentile) at the well, where he spoke of living water. He said to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” In the temple, he offers it again. Some believe he is a prophet, some the Messiah. The chief priests and the Pharisees expected officers to arrest Jesus. They did not.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a teacher, and among the Judeans’ rulers, appears in the narrative for the second time. He objects to their judgment of Jesus without questioning him first. In John’s gospel, it will be this Nicodemus who buys ointment for Jesus’ crucified body and helps Joseph of Arimathea bury him. From the darkness of that night when Nicodemus did understand how any person could be born a second time, I think we can say that eventually Nicodemus was born again to eternal life.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁶ Zechariah 10:1. NRSV

⁷ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1346, n.10:1–12.

⁸ Zechariah 14:8–9a.