Since my back is to you when I am getting things together for Eucharist I am not sure if you know what I am doing up there. I won’t go through all of it, but one thing I do is pour wine into the chalice and then add a bit of water. Well, one day when I was doing this I noticed there was something amiss as I was about to pour the “water” into the chalice. There was a rather pungent smell and so I pulled the cruet closer to my nose to get a good whiff and discovered that it was not water but was in fact vinegar. I had always assumed that if I performed a miracle that this would be the sort of second-rate type that I would perform, but my guess is that the explanation is a little less divine. I assume someone had left the vinegar in the cruet to clean it and then someone else came along, saw a clear liquid in the cruet, and decided it was good to go out. I mean white vinegar until you smell it is really indistinguishable from water. The point in all of this is that had I added the vinegar we would most likely have experienced a much less pleasant Eucharist at best and, depending on your theology, an invalid Eucharist at worst. Two things that look the same when mixed in with something else can achieve very different results. I thought of this today in terms of our Old Testament and our Gospel lessons. Not that there is a lot of distilled white vinegar mentioned in either passage but rather how the insertion of certain people into situations can radically change an outcome. Let’s look at the passages and then I will explain what I mean.

In the Old Testament we hear, “The people quarreled with Moses, and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?’ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst? So Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’” So the quick summary is the children of Israel were in the desert and people get themselves worked up into a lather over water and want to stone Moses. Since we have no experience with groups of people acting irrationally this may seem a little foreign but stick with me for a minute while we look at our lesson from John. In our Gospel we have the woman at the well who gives Jesus some water and then enters into a discussion about living water and who Jesus truly is. It ends with this: “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.’”

So here it is. You have humans talking in both passages. When one group talks it almost ends with Moses being stoned and when the woman talks it ends with the conversion of a number of Samaritans. The first group was like adding vinegar to the situation while that of the second was like adding water. One took a situation and made it worse while the second made it better and I would go as far as to say made it holy. Or put in very basic terms those in the dessert were doing the work of Satan while the woman at the well was doing the work of God. And the question we need to ask about ourselves, not just in Lent, but in our lives in general is what do we add? When we enter a situation do we make the things better or do we make them worse?

Now, before I go on it is probably important to clarify what I am talking about. For certainly there are times and places where it is necessary to deliver information that is less than pleasant. If you know that your house is on fire it is probably best to let everyone know rather than saying its time to set up a sundae bar. Yes sundaes are more fun than fires, but they all have their time and place. And in the reading from Exodus today you could argue that those grumbling were just really delivering some necessary information about the need to hydrate. And there is some truth in this. We need to make sure that we get enough to drink to promote healthy kidney functioning and all that. But I think the point where things go wrong is where we hear the people “complained against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’” The discussion is no longer informational, that is it is no longer about a problem in need of a solution, but has become personal. The people focused on Moses and changed the narrative from the need to hydrate to Moses deliberately taking them out of Egypt to kill them. They have turned the situation into a deliberate evil action on the part of Moses and now they can quite happily kill him because he is a bad man. Truth has been used to perpetuate a lie. Yes, they need water, but that does not make it true that Moses hatched an elaborate conspiracy involving seven plagues and the parting of the Red Sea so that he could lure the children of Israel into the dessert to kill them of thirst. And the question we must also ask is if this group got their way and they actually stoned Moses for his alleged iniquities would they be any less thirsty? -- of course not. And I think we can use this to hone in on the criteria for how we can be vinegar instead of water. The two mistakes made today with those grumbling was first that they are saying things that are not true and, the second, is they are saying things that are not helpful – Moses did not lure them into the desert and killing him will not help anything. The opposite of this example is to speak things that are true and are also helpful which seems a pretty good criteria for speaking in general. And this is quite obviously what the woman at the well did after she had an encounter with Jesus. She told her fellow Samaritans the truth about Jesus and this helped them come to understand him as the Messiah.

So now for the take home. We are living in some very panicked times. There is a real problem, just as there was a real problem in the desert, but we need to ask when we are talking about Coronavirus or any of the other things setting people on edge these days are we saying things that are true and that are helpful. Jesus said to his disciples “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” When we speak are we conveying this peace that Jesus bestowed upon us or are we getting the crowd ready to stone Moses.

I don’t know what the next few weeks and months will bring, I was an English major after all, but I do know that we are called to do the work of God, to be the water that makes things better. And so as we leave today we should think of the words of the Prayer of St. Francis, “Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.” May it be so now and forevermore.