

Third Sunday in Lent

Third Sunday in Lent – 15 March 2020

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Dr Hongsuk Um, Faith Nurture Forum Development Worker, for his thoughts on the third Sunday in Lent.

Our new online music resource is now live: [here](#) you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4). The search function allows you to bring up a list of songs by keyword, tune, theme, author, composer and metre, covering all of the indexes in the hymnbook. The site features Weekly Worship and thematic/seasonal playlists, alternative settings and background information on the hymns.

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Introduction

The liturgical calendar this week marks the third week of the Season of Lent. The rich themes in the lectionary readings today help us explore the privilege and blessings that have been bestowed on those reconciled to God. The passages remind us that 'our God is a great big God' who holds us in His hands, that God has known us and loved us and has provided for all our needs and more. The passages announce that our hope of salvation is assured by God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. They affirm that we have been given living water gushing up to provide eternal life. They state that we can boast in this living God and can rejoice, even when facing hardships.

Today's readings also help us reflect on Jesus Christ and our faithful relationship with God, through which all these privilege and blessings are made possible. They encourage us to acknowledge who our God is and to be aware of God's presence, God's work and God's ways in our whole life worship in spirit and truth. They invite us to appreciate the immeasurable love of God demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as we approach Easter Sunday.

When approaching the lectionary readings, I find it helpful, first, to study each passage, exploring how each sentence is composed and relates to the sentences that come before and after it to create and deliver intended meaning(s) as the story develops. I then look at what common themes appear in the texts and how they are presented in different contexts. As part of my approach, I reflect on stories (e.g. books, music, movies, news, memories, etc.) that may have a connection to these themes. Finally, I consider how the learning from the readings could be applied in our lives today.

[Exodus 17:1-7](#)

This passage presents a life-threatening situation, in which the Israelites suffer from having no water to drink (v1), and portrays how three different parties, the Israelites, Moses and God, react to it.

First, the reaction of the Israelites. The people actively engage in solving the problem. They instantly assess this hopeless situation and conclude who is responsible or to blame. They quarrel or find fault with Moses and demand that he provides water to drink (v.2). Finding that the situation is not improving, they take further action and complain about him (v.3), and threaten to get rid of him (v.4). Their despairing thirst and fear drive them to a certain extent to long for their time of slavery in Egypt (v.3).

This approach of the Israelites, though seemingly extreme, demonstrates a natural human response to such hardship. The people remember well the recent horror of the similar account in Exodus 15:22-26. Their children and livestock appear to be on the verge of dying (v.3). The words 'quarrel', 'complain' and 'stone' signify the distress of the people. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Second, the reaction of Moses. Unlike the Israelites, Moses appears extremely passive in resolving the current water issue; he turns down the people's demand (v.2). He prays not for water but for God's guidance for his people (v.4). Even for the miraculous event of producing water from the rock, Moses merely does what has been commanded by YHWH (vv.5-6).

This attitude of Moses, though seemingly irresponsible, illustrates faith and hope held out in times of hardship. He has witnessed how God led the Israelites to camp at Rephidim after the journey by stages from the wilderness of Sin (v.1). He well remembers how God intervened when the people suffered a similar issue in Exodus 15:22-26. The two questions asked in verse 2 reveal his persistent belief that it is God who is still in control and is responsible in the current situation. Moses' prayer (v.4) and obedience (v.6) reflect his sincere hope of God's saving intervention.

Finally, the reaction of God. God stays out of the picture as the anguish develops and the Israelites quarrel and test God. Called upon by Moses' prayer, God appears and resolves the problem by providing water out of a rock.

This approach from God, which may seem distant or removed, reaffirms the sovereignty and love of God. This is the God of the Israelites who has been leading their journey by stages (v.1). The divine intervention in verses 5-6 signifies that God is with the people and is fully aware of the hardship which both the Israelites and Moses are enduring, and reminds them of the power and care of God they witnessed in Egypt. Despite the quarrels and being tested by the people, God shows no anger or rebuke, but graciously and supernaturally provides for their needs.

The passage makes no clear judgement on which party was right or wrong or whose reaction was more or less reasonable. It leaves that to the reader and instead finishes with a simple report of the place's name change to 'Massah (test) and Meribah (quarrel)', hinting at the people's different reactions through the question: 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Psalm 95

This psalm, often called the Venite (from the Latin for 'O come'), has been widely used in the Kirk for a call and guide to worship. Divided into two parts (vv.1-7c and vv.7d-11), the first part presents two hymns (vv.1-5 and vv.6-7c), each consisting of a call to praise/worship and the reason for it. The second part delivers a prophetic word, warning people with lessons from Exodus 17:1-7. This psalm, like Psalms 50 and 81, is likely to have been sung when the worshippers entered the Temple courts at this festival time.

The first hymn (vv.1-2) invites the congregation to sing to God, the rock of our salvation, with a joyful noise and thanksgiving. This rock, a divine epithet, recalls the rock at Mount Horeb in Exodus 17:6 that yielded water and reminds people of the great work of God.

Why should the congregation sing to God with joy and thankfulness? It is because God is 'a great God and a great king above all gods' (v.3). God has not only created the whole world but also owns it and manages everything in it: the depths and the heights, the sea and the dry land (vv.4-5). If indeed God, the rock of 'our' salvation, is in control, those who believe in God cannot help but being truly joyful and thankful.

The second hymn (v.6) calls the congregation to express the '*worship*' of God, our maker. The word 'worship' is derived from the Old English 'worthship', proclaiming and giving worth to something considered precious and supremely valuable (cf. Psalm 96:8, for example.). The three main verbs in verse 6, 'worship', 'bow down' and 'kneel down', illustrate ways to prostrate oneself (cf. Genesis 18:2).

Why should the congregation come before God and pay homage to a great God and a great king? It is because God is 'our' God and they are 'the people of his pasture' and 'the sheep of his hand' (v.7). This great God, a great king, is not far off but is near, reachable and committed to care for the people. Those who belong to God enjoy this personal and intimate relationship.

As the congregation enter into the Temple courts 'today' (v.7) on this festival day, with singing, shouting and thanksgiving to God, 'today' they are warned not to harden their hearts as their ancestors had done in the events of Exodus. The psalmist views the real issue in that episode not as the absence of water but the consistent distrust of this God described in the hymns. Even though they had seen the work of God in Egypt and afterwards, they fundamentally misunderstood God and refused to acknowledge God as king and shepherd. The consequence of this distrust is fatal; 'they shall never enter my rest' (v.11). Though

delivered in the form of a warning, this prophesy conveys an earnest wish. The congregation are urged to acknowledge and trust God so as to enter the rest of God.

[Romans 5:1-11](#)

‘In the whole Bible there is hardly another chapter which can equal this triumphant text’ says Martin Luther. Following a long account of God’s wrath, judgment and way of justification (1:18–4:25), Paul goes on to exult in the ultimate blessings that have been bestowed on those justified by faith in God.

‘We have peace with God’ (v.1). This ‘peace’ does not refer to an absence of adversity, any subjective feeling or inward peace, but signifies a renewed relationship with God. Believers are no longer enemies of God under the divine wrath but are now reconciled to God (cf. vv.10, 11), leading to ‘peace with God’. This new status carries with it warranted access to the ‘grace’ (v.2), ‘the immeasurable resource of divine favour’. The Greek perfect tense in verse 2 (‘we have obtained’, ‘we stand’) indicates that this access is not time-bound but infinite. Faith in God brings believers divine reconciliation and privilege.

‘We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God and [...] in our sufferings’ (vv.2-3). ‘Hope’ here does not imply a personal wish but a confident anticipation of the coming reality of ‘the glory of God’, that is, ‘the fulfilment of the creator’s purpose for his creation’ (James Dunn, cf. 3:23). Since it is founded on God’s love that ‘has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit’ (v.5, cf. vv.6-8). Believers’ boasting is not only in this hope but also in sufferings. For them, hardship and suffering are not things to avoid, escape or complain about, but are to be viewed as an inevitable and essential feature of their lives for the glory of God. They help believers achieve hope through a chain reaction of endurance and character, ‘the quality of being approved after testing’ (vv.3-4). Faith in God enables believers to appreciate what they are experiencing and to look forward to assured glory.

‘Much more surely [...] will we be saved’ (v.9, 10). Reconciliation with God was made possible by divine love for the undeserving, as demonstrated by the once-for-all event of Jesus’ death (vv.6-8, 10); His life secures the fulfilment of believers’ final salvation from the wrath of God (v.9, 10), which has been inaugurated by faith and established and hoped for through the development of a faithful relationship with God. Faith in God promises believers salvation.

‘We even boast in God’ (v.11). What God has done once for all, together with believers’ humble trust in God, has redefined the whole spectrum of their relationship. Believers are no longer God’s enemies but now have been justified, reconciled to God and will surely be

subject to God's wrath no more. This enables them to boast not only in the hope of glory and in their sufferings, but also even in God. Faith in God makes it possible for believers to proudly rejoice in God.

While it is God that bestows all these blessing on those who trust in God, it is important to note that these are only made possible 'through our Lord Jesus Christ' (v.1, 11). His death and life stand as the core medium and agent of divine justification, reconciliation, hope, love and salvation.

[John 4:5-42](#)

On the way to Galilee from Judea (4:3), Jesus decides to visit Sychar, usually identified as the modern village of Askar, near the site of ancient Shechem, at the entrance to the valley between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal (Deuteronomy 11:26-32; 27:13-28:68). Jesus' dialogue with a Samaritan woman in the passage, presented in the unique Johannine literary technique of misunderstanding and revelation (John 3:1-15), provides a fuller and deeper appreciation of Jesus' ministry.

The woman in this passage is one of the hated Samaritans, a morally messy (vv.17-18) and shameful outsider (coming to the well alone at about noon, in order to avoid contact with other women). And she is 'thirsty'. Jesus' offer of living water (vv.10, 14) quickly draws her into conversation.

'Living water' could be equivalent of the gift of God in verse 10, since God is described as 'the fountain of living waters' in the OT (Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13). This living water as the gift of God probably refers to the Spirit given by Jesus (7:38-39), because the word 'gift' in the NT is mostly used for the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17; Hebrews 6:4) and it is explicitly mentioned in verses 23-24. Or it may denote Jesus' revelation or teaching, for God's wisdom is described as water that grants life in the OT (Proverbs 13:14; 18:4); the Torah, the Law, was regarded as the gift of God (Sirach 24:23-29). Or 'living water' could signify both of these, since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth that interprets Jesus' revelation or teaching (14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13). This living water is promised to gush up to eternal life (v.14).

The woman's sincere desire for living water leads Jesus to reveal the true nature of her thirst, as demonstrated in her relationships with men (vv.16-18). The seemingly coincidental yet intentionally chosen location of the conversation in front of Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal and Jesus' divine knowledge of her immoral life guide the conversation to the issue of the location of worship, where her meaningful relationship with God can be

restored. Jesus' ground-breaking teaching on true worship 'in spirit and truth' (vv.21-24) reminds the woman of the need for the coming of the 'Taheb' (the 'Restorer'), the Samaritan Messiah, for her salvation (cf. v.42).

Jesus' self-disclosure in such simple and plain words ('I am he', v.26), which is the only occasion in the gospel of John when Jesus admits His messiahship before His trial, enables the woman to finally recognise who Jesus is and what He has been doing with her: 'he would have given you living water' (v.10). The Samaritan woman's testimony to her fellow townspeople culminates in their coming to faith in Jesus (vv.39-42).

Jesus' dialogue with His disciples (vv.31-38) signifies that this visit to the city was deliberately arranged. It was 'to do the will of him (God) who sent me and to complete his work' (v.34). He could see 'how the fields are ripe for harvesting' (v.35) in Samaria, or at least in Sychar. The location of the city was ideal for Jesus' ministry. Although a Jewish man, He was more than willing to initiate a conversation with a woman from Samaria in public, which was historically and culturally controversial (cf. v.9, 27), so as to provide 'a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (v.14).

Sermon ideas

The sermon could compare the stories of three groups presented in the lectionary readings (the Israelites and Moses in Exodus 17 and the Samaritan woman in John 4) and explore the themes: 'thirst and living water' and 'hardships and hope'.

Idea 1 – Thirst and living water ('Sir, give me this (living) water', John 4:15).

The sermon could begin with (a small group conversation around) these questions: 'What are you thirsty for these days?' 'Do you recognise your true thirst?', 'What do you do (have you done) to satisfy your thirst?'

Three groups in today's readings were thirsty. What were they really thirsty for? How did they react to their thirst? Why are their reactions different from one another? What caused such differences? It would be worth spending some time exploring these questions.

According to the passages, God graciously provides water to the Israelites, although they tested God (Exodus 17:6). Jesus promises to give living water to those who ask (John 4:10). By what means could we develop an awareness of our spiritual thirst? What would it look like to enjoy living water more fully in our lives, in our congregation and in our community?

The sermon could finish with these questions: ‘What are you thirsty for?’, ‘What would you do to satisfy your thirst?’

Idea 2 – Hardships and hope (‘We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God... but we also boast in our sufferings’, Romans 5:2–3).

The sermon could begin with (a small group conversation around) these questions: ‘What kind of hardships are you (have you been) facing?’, ‘What do you do (have you done) about those hardships?’

The Israelites and Moses were suffering from a lack of water, and the Samaritan woman from the lack of meaningful relationships. Whereas the Israelites were quick to quarrel, despair and even test God despite the constant guidance and provision of God throughout their journey since the Exodus, Moses cared for his people and prayed for God’s guidance rather than for water. The Samaritan woman kept changing her relationship with a man, inviting further hardship of social isolation. Yet, when encountering Jesus, she actively sought a truthful relationship with God. Why are their reactions to hardships different from one another? What caused such differences?

Paul states that those reconciled to God through Jesus Christ are given divine blessings to boast in sufferings because of the hope that never disappoints (Romans 5:3). How could we help those who are suffering hardships to find hope? What would it look like to have more confidence in the hope of sharing God’s glory in our lives, in our congregation and in our community? By what means could this boasting in hardships be encouraged in the congregation?

The sermon could finish with these questions: ‘What kind of hardships are you facing today?’, ‘What would you do about those hardships?’

Prayers

Call to Worship (modified from Psalm 95)

Leader: Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation!

All: For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods.

Leader: Come, let us come before the Lord with thanksgiving;
and extol Him with music and song!

**All: For the depths of the earth are in the hand of the Lord
and the mountain peaks belong to Him.
He made the sea and His hands formed the dry land.**

Leader: Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

**All: For the Lord is our God,
and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care.**

Amen

Approach to God with thanksgiving

God of creation, we are here together to worship Your holy name.
Lord of salvation, we are here together to praise what You have done for us.
King of blessings, we are here together to give You the best that we can bring.

Your sovereign power holds us in being.
Your immeasurable love makes the impossible possible for us.
Your infinite grace creates a way for us to enjoy friendship with You.
Your unfailing faithfulness safeguards the completion of our salvation.

You are always there for us, never growing old, never growing bored, never growing tired.
Your mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.

For all these, we give thanks to You.

As we come into Your presence together,
pour Your love into our hearts once again through Your Holy Spirit
renew our hope of sharing Your glory
and quench our thirst with Your living water welling up to eternal life.

May we keep boasting in You and in our hardships,
May we keep glorifying Your name in our whole life worship in spirit and truth.
May we keep living as a source of blessing in the world
Amen

Confession

Immortal, invisible, God only wise:
so far beyond us, so near to us
with Your love in Jesus Your son,

As we thank You for Your indescribable love for us,
we confess that down in life's valley,
we have ignored You or broken Your heart.

Living God,
forgive us for not taking rest from work and not taking time out for worship.

Forgive us for turning aside to other gods:
gods of human making: power and pounds; sex and success; money and machines.
Forgive us for venerating such false idols.

Forgive us for thinking and speaking against our neighbours,
and for any envy of their good fortune;
and for not thinking and doing enough for those near to us.

Maybe we do not kill or steal,
but forgive us for murderous feelings
and for thinking we might take something that is not ours.

And, Lord God,
forgive us for breaking the new commandment,
given by Your son:
to love others...even our enemies.

Merciful God,
set Christ's cross between our souls and our sins ...
As we are contrite, assure us by the Holy Spirit that we are
pardoned, healed, restored, forgiven.
And by Christ's grace raise us
to new heights of fresh obedience and good and glorious living.
Amen (adapted from 'Presence' in *Pray Now 2007*)

Intercession

Loving Jesus, in our misunderstanding,
meet us.

Loving Jesus, in our secret lives,
meet us.

Loving Jesus, in our solitary living,
meet us.

Meet us with the full force of heaven,
gently,
with a grace-filled moment and a living word,
that speaks into all living deserts:
the dryness of our relationship,
the barrenness of our community,
the solitariness of our culture
to every woman enslaved,
to every asylum seeker turned away,
to every child abandoned.

Water these deserts,
not just with water,
but with living water,
that each may never thirst again,
that this world may never thirst again.

Loving Jesus, in our thirst for connection,
within a community disconnected,
may we pass the cup abundantly
and with reckless generosity.

Amen ('Woman at the well and Jesus' in *Pray Now 2008*)

Alternative Material

This material has been supplied by kind permission of Spill the Beans and allows you to explore the readings or theme of the service in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their [website](#).

Bible Notes - [Exodus 17:1-7](#)

The quarrelling place

I can picture the scene: a trek of refugees in the hostile environment of the Sinai desert, tired and dusty, exhausted and ready to break into tears, or into a fight, as the case may be. God's people are fed up and who can blame them: walking miles and miles through the wilderness. The heat, the monotony of the landscape is getting to them, they have to make do with what is available, and that is not much.

It is enough for anyone to make the promised land look a long distance away. It is enough for anyone to ask: Why did we ever leave Egypt? What dream are we chasing? Is God with us?

In Egypt at least the Israelites knew what to expect. Life made sense. Work might have been hard, but at least you knew what you had to do when you got up in the morning. Freedom might not have been part of their vocabulary, but at least food and water were not in short supply. Life might not have been easy, not always fair, but you accept that, get on with it, don't you? Don't we?

What is the wilderness that we are stumbling through, too numb to notice what is wrong, too tired for dreams and visions? Is it a land where water is not a human right, but a commodity for large companies, creaming off and bottling what can be sold and leaving the filthy rest to those who need it most?

Is it a land where we fight for necessities, where the strong help themselves and the weak are left with the leftovers of the world's table?

Do we accept that and get on with it? Life has changed for the Israelites and there experience thus far is that the change has not necessarily been for the better. They moan, as a result, and they turn to their leader. The picture of Moses that is drawn is not the best:

there was a time when he stood up for his people in front of Pharaoh, now that he has led them into the desert, into the wilderness, convinced them that God has promised a better future, a land of milk and honey, he tells them to get lost.

Only when his own skin is threatened does he turn to God for help. Does he not care any more? The Israelites are right to moan and so are we: God's people do moan, they test God, they stand up for their rights and the rights of others, they do not accept a life in the wilderness, they hold their leaders to account. Ultimately, they hold God to account: show yourself God, if you are really with us, give us what we need, you have made a promise, so keep it!

And so he does, God goes before his people, talks to Moses, face to face, in the sight of the elders. He is still with his people: he provides and sustains.

They are not perfect, God's people: they quarrel and they doubt. Moses knows that, accepts that, indeed he makes it a fact, calls the place a quarrelling stone, for generations to remember. But do we have to?

How do we want to shape our communities, our church, our lives with God? What name will we give the places that we call home, how do we call the places we pass through? What reality do we want to create? A reality where the strong and the weak forever compete for the essentials of life, a quarrelling place, or a reality with God who provides and sustains through us? How will we be remembered? What names will we be given?

Retelling the story for young people

This is a story from long ago when Moses was leading his people away from Egypt to a new home in a better land. They had been walking through the desert for a long time and today there was no water. Not a drip drop.

"I'm thirsty!" someone said.

"Me too!" shouted another.

"Give us some water, Moses!"

Soon everyone was saying it, a whole big crowd of hot, thirsty, grumpy people.

"Give us some water! Give us some water!"

Moses started feeling very hot and grumpy too. What was he supposed to do to get water for all his friends in the middle of a desert?

But they kept shouting, “Give us some water! Give us some water! And tell us, is God still here with us or has God gone away and left us!”

So Moses complained to God, “What am I supposed to do, God? What am I supposed to do for all these hot, thirsty, grumpy people? They want me to give them water but what can I do about it? And are you still with us God? Hellllooooo? Are you still with us or have you gone away and left us?”

Well, the people were grumpy and Moses was grumpy, but God didn’t get grumpy. The people thought God might have gone away and Moses thought God might have gone away, but God hadn’t gone away and left them.

God listened to all the hot, thirsty, grumpy people and he loved them very much, so he said to Moses, “Follow me to that big rock over there. Hit the rock with your stick!”

So Moses went to the big rock and hit it with his stick. WHOOSH! GURGLE! SPLOSSHHH! Water came pouring out and everyone had enough to drink!

Activities

Without Water

True or False? Ask the young people to decide whether the following statements are true or false.

- | | |
|---|-----|
| Without water you would stay healthy | (F) |
| Without water you would sweat a lot | (F) |
| Without water you would have a dry mouth | (T) |
| Without water you would get sore muscles | (T) |
| Without water you would have more headaches | (T) |
| Without water you would get kidney problems | (T) |
| Without water you would get more wrinkles | (T) |
| Without water your crops would grow better | (T) |

Without water you would be more energetic (F)

Without water you would feel more tired (T)

Local Street Names

You will need: anagrams of local street names (Adapt the difficulty according to your age group).

You will have to make this anagram game up yourself because you will know what streets your children live in and also the local well-known streets. Just re-arrange the names of the street and your town/village for the children to decipher which is which.

Can the children come up with a new name for your town/village or street names reflecting the history of your area?

Prayers

Call to worship

Thirsty for refreshment

we come to you,

Lord of the barren Lenten Landscape
of the desert.

Along with the followers of Moses
we bring our grumbles

our demands and our complaints.

Help us now to find the refreshing water
in the rocks of our lives.

Let us approach God,

open to his refreshing water of life,

putting our quarrels behind us,

we come to God to be refreshed.

Responses

Leader: Are you thirsty?

All: We thirst for God's word.

Leader: Have you left your grumbles behind?

All: We left them at the door.

Leader: Can you learn a new way of being?

All: Yes, refreshed by God we are willing to be led.

Leader: Come as we follow God
out of the desert,
into worshipping him—
the one who quenches our thirst.

Prayer of sending

God show us your way:
show us what we are,
show us who we are,
remind us as we need
so that out in your world
we remember that we are
forever to be your people,
this day and always.

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Musical suggestions

You can hear samples of these suggestions in the 'Weekly Worship' section of <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/>. This new online music resource will allow you to listen to and search the breadth of music available in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4).

You will find hidden gems and alternative arrangements to familiar songs that will inspire creativity and spark fresh curiosity about how we best use music in worship.

Exodus 17:1–7

- CH4 153 – “Great is thy faithfulness”
- CH4 167 – “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”
- CH4 550 – “As the deer pants for the water”

Psalm 95

- CH4 531 – “My Jesus, my Saviour”
- CH4 802 – “We are here to praise you”

- “Our God is a Great Big God” (children friendly)

Romans 5:1–11

- CH4 396 – “And can it be, that I should gain”

- CH4 459 – “Crown him with many crowns”

- CH4 466 – “Before the throne of God above”

- CH4 561 – “Blessed assurance”

John 4:5–42

- CH4 348 – “Praise the One who breaks the darkness”

- CH4 503 – “I will offer up my life in spirit and truth”

- CH4 525 – “Have you heard the raindrops” (children friendly)

- CH4 722 – “Spirit of God, come dwell within me”

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