

Third Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2020

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

Exodus 17
Psalm 95
Romans 5: 1-11
John 4: 5-42

**A Lenten Encounter with Jesus:
Active Looking**



Jesus and the Samaritan Woman by Jorge Cocco

There is an ironically strong parallel between us and these Israelites this morning: we, like they, find ourselves in a wilderness of uncertainty, a dessert filled with new experiences and unknown destination. And...while not actually grumbling perhaps, we are sorely disappointed by multiple schedule and event cancelations and the prospect of even more...and we are fearful of the unknown. At this point, we do have water but a visit to the grocery store or Amazon.com tells us that there is a certain lack of access to an abundance of basic things that we are accustomed to taking for granted. And, so, like Moses and the people, we are inclined to ask the question, “Is the Lord among us or not?!”

This question may be taken in a couple of ways. It might be asked with angry and demanding tone...frustration and indignation that, as God’s people, we are in such a situation. Or we may ask it as a way of bolstering hope within each other...as a kind of rallying cry that suggests, “Wait a minute. We are people of faith. God has brought us through much worse things than this before. Why should we despair now? Is the Lord among us or not? Of course God is with us.”

The president of Andover Newton Theological Seminary, Martin Copenhaver, wrote a book several years back entitled Jesus Is the Question. He did some pretty solid research on the 307 questions that Jesus asked in the Scriptures and the 183 questions Jesus was asked by others. Copenhaver suggests that, while both sets of questions include everything from simple information gathering to attempts to develop closer relationships, the real approach to questions in Scripture (or anywhere for that matter) is best served not so much to provide an answer as to wonder about the purpose of the question. Which is what we are doing here: what was the purpose of the Israelites’ question, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Is it to create dissension or divisiveness, or to vent; or to bond the people together so that they become united in the face of a common challenge.

This week your church...Woods Church...has been prayerfully and intentionally going about decisions and actions that provide us with the safest of measures against the spread of the Corona Virus as you have heard. Susan and the Session, Jacob and I and John and the rest of our staff have been focused upon practical matters, combining our best efforts with the expertise of those professionals in the fields of medicine and disease control. And we have done so on the same foundation of trust by which Moses led the people...God is with us/among us.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to have seen Moses strike a solid rock with essentially a stick and bring forth water in the midst of the desert? Shocking? Unbelievable? Life changing?

Psychology today has a relatively new term to describe such dramatic moments...although for millennials the term represents more tragic life alternating exposures. 9-11 and Columbine are known as “flashbulb memories.” Flashbulb memories are indelible memories of happenings that will not fade with the passage of time as they are things that are formative and truly life altering in an individual’s experience. They impact a person’s understanding of reality and belief. I believe that the Exodus we read about today could have been termed a positive “flashbulb memory.”

We do tend to come up with names for experiences that have had a strong impact on us...like 9-11 and Columbine...names that instantly trigger memories for those who experienced the event. We name these times without thinking. For example, in my family, the minute anyone mentions “hibiscus” we all know and flash to fond memories of decades of summer vacations at a place of that name in St. Augustine. Or...as we are moving into year two now of settling my mom’s estate and clearing out her house, one only has to say “Geeg’s house,” and immediately the vision of 92 years of collections of all sorts of things come to mind.

Did you know that the rock in Exodus from which water gushed after being struck by Moses’ staff (same one used to part the waters in Egypt)...was named not after Moses or some other such option, but after the experience itself: the experience of Israel’s being assured...even after all their fear and grumbling...that God was among them. It is perhaps too easy for us to identify with the Israelites here as we change our life’s patterns and routines to take on this viral threat to our well-being. But, unlike the Israelites, we, as a church, do not seemingly forget that God has been among us in worse scenarios than this one...individually and collectively.

This Exodus story is not really simply about God’s being able to bring water from a rock or even about Moses’ authority as a ruler to lead the people and God’s use of him to that end. It is really about what happens when people become disheartened and frustrated and forget the faith that sustained them. It is about what it takes to have faith restored...to be reminded of God’s ongoing presence with us through anything and everything. And it resides in the question: “Is God among us or not?” And in the need to respond together as a church, to the purpose of the question which is to reclaim the rich heritage we have as a people of faith.

Let this time be remembered not by the event of the Corona Virus but by our experience of the time when we responded as people who were confident that God was among us in a time of need. We are indeed in need of a resolution but what we must have to survive is our faith and trust in God who is among us and who, for us, is much more than anything that can be purchased on grocery shelves or ordered on Amazon...living bread/living water.

Rev. Jacob Snowden

Reading from John, chapter 4, verses 5-42:

He came into Sychar, a Samaritan village that bordered the field Jacob had given his son Joseph. Jacob's well was still there. Jesus, worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon.

A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Jesus said, "Would you give me a drink of water?" (His disciples had gone to the village to buy food for lunch.)

The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, "How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (Jews in those days wouldn't be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)

Jesus answered, "If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water."

The woman said, "Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this 'living water'? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?"

Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life."

The woman said, "Sir, give me this water so I won't ever get thirsty, won't ever have to come back to this well again!"

He said, "Go call your husband and then come back."

"I have no husband," she said.

"That's nicely put: 'I have no husband.' You've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now isn't even your husband. You spoke the truth there, sure enough."

"Oh, so you're a prophet! Well, tell me this: Our ancestors worshiped God at this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right?"

"Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you Samaritans will worship the Father neither here at this mountain nor there in Jerusalem. You worship guessing in the dark; we Jews worship in the clear light of day. God's way of salvation is made available through the Jews. But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter.

“It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

The woman said, “I don’t know about that. I do know that the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we’ll get the whole story.”

“I am he,” said Jesus. “You don’t have to wait any longer or look any further.”

Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked. They couldn’t believe he was talking with that kind of a woman. No one said what they were all thinking, but their faces showed it.

The woman took the hint and left. In her confusion she left her water pot. Back in the village she told the people, “Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?” And they went out to see for themselves.

In the meantime, the disciples pressed him, “Rabbi, eat. Aren’t you going to eat?”

He told them, “I have food to eat you know nothing about.”

The disciples were puzzled. “Who could have brought him food?”

Jesus said, “The food that keeps me going is that I do the will of the One who sent me, finishing the work he started. As you look around right now, wouldn’t you say that in about four months it will be time to harvest? Well, I’m telling you to open your eyes and take a good look at what’s right in front of you. These Samaritan fields are ripe. It’s harvest time!

“The Harvester isn’t waiting. He’s taking his pay, gathering in this grain that’s ripe for eternal life. Now the Sower is arm in arm with the Harvester, triumphant. That’s the truth of the saying, ‘This one sows, that one harvests.’ I sent you to harvest a field you never worked. Without lifting a finger, you have walked in on a field worked long and hard by others.”

Many of the Samaritans from that village committed themselves to him because of the woman’s witness: “He knew all about the things I did. He knows me inside and out!” They asked him to stay on, so Jesus stayed two days. A lot more people entrusted their lives to him when they heard what he had to say. They said to the woman, “We’re no longer taking this on your say-so. We’ve heard it for ourselves and know it for sure. He’s the Savior of the world!”

After the two days he left for Galilee. Now, Jesus knew well from experience that a prophet is not respected in the place where he grew up. So when he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, but only because they were impressed with what he had done in Jerusalem during the Passover Feast, not that they really had a clue about who he was or what he was up to.

**The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray.

God, for those who are dry, let us be refreshed by the waters of your comfort, grace, and love. Amen.

What better way to talk about living water than by live streaming? I have been listening to Otis Redding's cover of "You Don't Miss Your Water" an awful lot this week. In his inimitable way, Redding pours out his soul repeating, "You don't miss your water 'til your well runs dry." He needs his water, he loves his water, he misses his water, and he's a little thirsty now. This week, staring at an empty sanctuary, I feel like my well is running dry. I miss my water--the baptisms, the communion, the pancake breakfast, the Bible studies. On a less pious note, I'm missing March Madness and bracketology. And after the day-to-day or even hour-to-hour changes of this past week, I'm a little thirsty now for the normal "flow" of things.

How can we drink some living water during a global pandemic? This has been a week of social distancing, turbulent markets, and everything including Disneyland is closed.

With everything closed, how do we keep our hearts open in the places of Massah and Meribah, our own inner deserts of Quarrelling and Testiness? Let's turn to John 4 for an answer.

John 4 begins with Jesus in need. He is thirsty. There is a lot of drinking in John. Jesus begins his ministry because a wedding has run out of wine. And here Jesus sits at the rim of a well with no bucket, at noon, and a middle eastern sun bearing down on him. By the end of John, perhaps you will recall that from the cross Jesus says he is thirsty. God in Christ is not unacquainted with running dry.

A woman approaches Jesus. She has a bucket, but when Jesus asks for a drink, she is surprised by their encounter. There are a lot of contrasts at play in this passage. Man and woman, Jew and Samaritan, unwed and five times married. For another contrast, we are talking about lenten encounters during weeks of social distancing. I trust you see the irony. Yet in the text, there is a lot of social distance that is being closed--gender distance, ethnic distance, social distance, because isn't it true that we all need water? We are drawn to the same life-giving places.

People at the office gather around the water cooler. Buddies meet "down at the local watering hole." First dates meet for a drink.

People thirst for water and for social interaction. Perhaps we understand that even more clearly after this past week. We already have a sense of how God has met those needs in Israel's history. In this passage, we consider how our needs are met in Christ as Jesus offers living water.

Strikingly, no one in this passage drinks anything. Jesus asks for a drink. He offers living water, but the Samaritan runs off. In his interactions with his disciples a little later, Jesus offers spiritual sustenance, which is especially pertinent to our situation this week and the next several weeks.

So what does Jesus offer? Just what does Jesus mean by "living water"? I'd like to make a few observations.

First, whatever Jesus provides, he offers it in unexpected circumstances. Remember it was Jesus who was thirsty and tired. Remember it was the woman who had a bucket at the well. Yet, Jesus offers living water that gushes in that strange circumstance. We are in unexpected circumstances, but there is room to trust that God still provides and still overcomes the barriers that press on us. Perhaps he means respect or conversation--it is the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in all of scripture. Maybe he means baptism. In any case, what he offers comes in an undeniably strange encounter.

Secondly, Jesus speaks beyond basic needs and toward opportunity. After Jesus offers living water to the woman, and when the disciples return, he talks to them about a food to eat they don't know about. John 4:34 reads, *My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work.* There are lots of things our current situation calls for--apparently a lot of toilet paper.

I'm not saying God doesn't provide toilet paper. I am saying God might be thinking bigger than that. While it would be easy to focus on literal food, literal water, or literal toilet paper, as the body of Christ, how can we think about constantly pursuing God's work beyond the basics? How might our current moment call us to new ways of connecting and caring that we would not have considered otherwise? Until this week, I admit I had never imagined a service quite like this one. We can choose to see that we are missing out on quite a lot this week, but what a grace it is to see what is still possible! Right now we are doing a new, creative thing to meet our new, pressing challenges.

Jesus told his disciples the Samaritan fields were ripe for harvest. The woman runs to tell people she has met the Messiah, after Nicodemus, a teacher of the Jews, failed to understand what Jesus was saying. I think Jesus looked beyond what was expected or simple--a ministry to the Jews--and saw a world of new possibilities ahead. Where can we find opportunities in our quickly changing context to administer hope, grace, and compassion in new forms, harvesting in new fields?

Third, this passage literally says that we should not be concerned about where we worship. Samaritans worshipped on a mountain; Jews worshipped in the temple. I am accustomed to worship in a sanctuary full of people. Yet God calls for us to worship in spirit and truth. Eugene Peterson interprets this passage in The Message in this way:

“It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

Worshipping together is wonderful. The body of Christ is made of many parts, and being a part of that body is not something easily done with social distancing. Yet we read in scripture that God is unconcerned with stained glass or clear, 9:30 or 11:00 o’clock worship. No, God cares that people worship out of their truest selves. The church is the people of God, not the steeples of God. So I trust God notices your faithfulness, if your connection is personal or 4G, or a LAN line. If living water is anything, I trust that it is fluid enough to deal with whatever circumstances are ahead--whether that is related to our health, our economy, our politics, or whatever else the future holds.

We may not know what the future holds, but we can trust the One who holds our future. If your wells of hope, peace, and joy are dry this morning, then drink of Christ’s living water. In all circumstances, in all places, in every opportunity, know God is providing for us and moving alongside us in every way.

Amen.