

Lent 3A (3/15/2020)

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

The well is a remote place, a lonely place. But, it's precisely there that Jesus meets the Samaritan woman with the promise of living water, a surge of grace "gushing up to eternal life." Living water flows inevitably to the lowest places in our lives, the places where we are most disappointed, most afraid, most isolated. And, a taste of this water, even in seclusion, drives us back toward our neighbors, as our buckets overflow to those around us.

The irony is not lost on me. The Sunday that we recall the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, the Sunday that he promises to refresh us all with living water, "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life," also happens to be the Sunday that we've removed the water from the baptismal font. It's a practical consideration, one measure among many others to reduce the risk of spreading the novel coronavirus. Of course, we haven't cancelled baptismal remembrance altogether; we've simply moved it to the restroom, where you're urged to wash your hands regularly, scrubbing with soap for at least twenty seconds. Still, the question remains: **What does it mean to receive the promise of living water in a time when the well has dried up?**

Rachel Held Evans includes a beautiful retelling of our Gospel from John today in her last book, *Inspired*. "I – the one speaking to you," Jesus tells the woman at the well, "[I] am he, [the Messiah]." The story continues:

At that, he handed me the bucket of water. I brought it to my lips, lifted my head, and drank deep of the coolest, richest water I ever tasted. I drank and drank and drank. I drank until I could no longer breathe.

When I finished, I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and handed the bucket back to the man, who, to my amazement, threw his head back and gulped the rest of it down, dousing his dusty face with the last splash that remained. For a moment, I doubted what I'd just witnessed. This man, this Jew – this *Messiah* – drank from my defiled cup. And with relish.¹

The shattered boundary between man and woman, Jew and Samaritan, holy and unholy is the core message of today's Gospel. Christ breaks down the dividing walls between us; he is our peace.² Yet, in the time of the coronavirus, we could never imagine such social abandon. What better way to spread disease than to share a bucket of water?

On the other hand, this account speaks a profound word to the particular circumstances in which we suddenly find ourselves. Jacob's well might have been a place for other women to gather, to connect, to let their children play together, but not the woman in our Gospel. On account of her complicated history, and thus her social dislocation, she comes to the well alone at midday, long after her neighbors have departed. **For her, the well is a remote place, a lonely place. But, it's precisely there that Jesus meets her with the promise of living water, the promise of abundant and enduring grace. Drinking her fill, she can't help but rush to tell her neighbors, the same neighbors with whom she has lived in tension: *Come and see.***

¹ 144-5.

² Ephesians 2:14.

In light of the widespread effort to slow the spread of coronavirus, we've made the painful decision to suspend all congregational activities involving groups, to include public worship on Sundays, for the next several weeks beginning tomorrow. I would never have expected this scenario. The gathering of God's people in this place is our primary point of contact with God's grace, as we hear a word of promise and share a holy meal every week, sent out again strengthened for lives of faith. But the font is empty, and tomorrow the doors of the church will be closed. **In the coming weeks, you're likely to experience something akin to the Samaritan woman's sense of dislocation. It will be a time of increased apprehension and seclusion, a time of loneliness. But, it's precisely in this time that you can count on the accompaniment of Christ, reaching out to you with the promise of living water, a surge of grace "gushing up to eternal life."** Philip Yancey puts it this way: "Grace, like water, flows downward... no matter how low we sink, grace flows to that lowest part."³

Dear church, **living water flows inevitably to the lowest places in our lives, the places where we are most disappointed, most afraid, most isolated. What's more, a taste of this water, even in seclusion, drives us back toward our neighbors, as our buckets overflow to those around us.** How will Christ fill your bucket in the uncertainty of the weeks to come, and how might it spill over to your neighbors, even if you remain six feet apart?

³ As cited by Kathryn Schifferdecker in "A Deeper Family Story," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5420>.

