
What a week this has been.+++ It seems so long ago that I was calculating how you’d all react to the bold suggestion that we not shake hands – that we not hug one another in greeting. It seems so long ago that I reminded you there’s hand sanitizer in every pew, and I made the awkward suggestion that you actually use it after passing the peace, after the offering, and again as the service ended.+++ Ah, that was a simpler time, wasn’t it?... I hoped you wouldn’t think I was over-reacting – that I was being an alarmist – for suggesting we not shake hands!++++++ Now, just 7 days later, I’m preaching to a camera in an empty sanctuary.+++ This new coronavirus has infiltrated itself into pretty much every news story – every conversation – and, I dare say, almost every thought we have.+++ We take so much for granted in our lives, don’t we? More than we realize. We don’t think twice about going to a movie, eating at a restaurant, or doing a little shopping. We take it for granted that we can come into our houses of worship and praise God together,... together with people we love.+++ But how quickly this sense of security can tumble down around us. Now, the mandate for social isolation – the fear of getting sick, or watching a dear family member get sick – the sense of foreboding in the air,... +++ We are each on our own, lonely, wilderness journey – not having a sense of where the journey is taking us – or how long it will take to get there. And there’s a foreboding feeling that things are going to get worse before they get better.

If anyone could understand what you are all feeling right now, it’s the Israelites, on their journey through the wilderness. It hadn’t been long since God’s People were slaves in Egypt – rescued by God through Moses, across the Red Sea to freedom. But now... about a month and half later..., they’ve lost the sense of adventure – if things are going to be different, OK, but can’t we settle into a new normal? Can’t we just get where we’re going so we can rest well at night instead of wondering what new surprises are in store for tomorrow? The Israelites are realizing there a lot more questions about day-to-day survival than there used to be – and they are wondering if they made a mistake by starting this journey in the first place. In the chapter just before today’s reading, they are starving for lack of food – they complain against Moses: “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat... and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”+++ And now, in our reading, it’s thirst that drives them to complain again: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”+++ These are words of desperation from a people who find they have lost their moorings – who suddenly feel more vulnerable than they’ve ever felt before – facing a vast wilderness that seems to have no end.+++++++++ I think Israel’s wilderness journey – the urge to cry out to the Lord, “WHY?” feels familiar to many of us this morning.

+++

Wilderness Journeys. That’s the theme of my Lenten sermon series this year: the 40-day wilderness journey we each take for our self – a journey that beings with a Wednesday reminder that we are ashes and to ashes we will return, and then follows a path of prayer, self-examination and restoration – a path that offers to lead us back to our savior. Specifically, we are focusing on the milestones that we’ll come across along the way – milestones that mark how far we’ve already traveled – that help us make sure we are on the right path – and give us an idea of how much farther we still need to go. The milestones of our Lenten journey this year are through the eyes of people who encounter Jesus in the Gospel of John – people on their own paths of faith and discovery. Last week, it was a curious Pharisee named Nicodemus. Through his encounter with Jesus we learned that Christ offers nothing less than a brand-new life – a chance to start over – to be born again from above – a chance... to live in... and among... the winds of the Spirit. That milestone pointed in the direction of mystery – leading you to a Creator God you know intimately yet will never fully know.+++Today’s milestone comes to us through a Samaritan Woman who meets Jesus at a well. Let’s take a look at it – and see what it tells us about our Lenten Journey.

+++++++

One thing we’ve learned this week is that a virus is a great equalizer. It doesn’t differentiate between the powerful and the poor – the 1% and everybody else. A virus doesn’t care about careful messaging, political maneuvering, or blame. It just does what it does... with quiet efficiency, spreading from nation to nation, ... community to community, ... person to person – while we respond in all our human ways – some helpful and some less so: fear, panic, quarantine,... canceling public events (including corporate worship) to provide “social distance”,... and, of course, hoarding Clorox wipes, hand sanitizer, and, for some reason,... toilet paper.+++ When things start to go south, we all the same need for shelter, for protection from violence, for food. We all need some one to recognize our fear, to wipe the tear from our eye, to tell us everything’s going to be OK. We all need a savior.+++ We feel it in our bones – we hunger and thirst for relief. But we don’t often know how to put it into words.+++ I think that’s what I like so much about this Samaritan woman: she has a quiet dignity beyond her station in life. She finds words to say what she’s thinking – and she isn’t intimidated.+++ This is all the more impressive when we put together the clues we have about her. First of all, she must be a loner, living on the fringes of her community. She’s had 5 husbands and is now involved with a man she hasn’t married. Now, there could be
legitimate reasons for this – maybe she got married as a teenager and was widowed multiple times. Maybe she’s been abused or abandoned by her husbands. But it seems clear she’s made some regrettable choices in her life – and probably been involved in some scandals. She must not be accepted by the other women of her town. Why else would she be coming to the well, alone, during the hottest part of the day – instead of in the morning with everyone else – before the sun rode so high in the sky? I think it’s fair to say she spends a lot of time alone.

So, whatever burdens she’s carrying – she’s carrying them alone, too. +++ And Jesus sees all of this in her – he knows everything about her as soon as he lays eyes on her. +++ But he doesn’t judge her. In fact, he meets her halfway – he levels the playing field being open about his own weakness, his own thirst. The first thing he says is, “Give me a drink.” So, the woman’s first impression of Jesus isn’t as the Messiah, or the leader of a movement. Her first impression is of a foreigner, a Jew, who has just made a journey across the border, through the wilderness... And, he is thirsty. +++ And, you know, she has a lot of nerve... After Jesus asks for a drink of water, she comes right out and name the elephant in the room. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” +++ And then she has a real conversation with Jesus – respectfully, yet openly, about the differences between the Jews and the Samaritans: “Our people worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” +++ And she talks to Jesus about water – about the Living water Jesus is offering (though she really doesn’t understand what that’s all about) – but, yeah, of course, she’d love to have some of this fancy living water if it means she’d “never be thirsty [again] or have to keep coming here to draw water” every day. She understands Jesus as well as she is able to. +++ And, you know, I think she begins to piece together who Jesus is on her own – while he’s explaining that “God is spirit, and those who worship... must worship in spirit and truth;” she jumps in and brings up the coming Messiah – that the Messiah “will proclaim all things to us,” just like Jesus is doing right now, for an audience of one, at this Wilderness Well. +++ +++

But what happens next is what I like best of all about her – when Jesus confirms that, in fact, he is the Messiah they’ve been waiting for – she drops everything... Literally – the woman leaves her water jar right there at the well... She seems to ignore the disciples who just walked up – and she hurries back to her city – back to her people – to tell them to come and see Jesus: ... the same people who shame her into coming to the well – alone – in the heat of the day... the same people to whom she is invisible. None of that matters anymore – she’s just has to share her good news. +++ +++ John the Baptist had testified about him... Jesus’ disciples believed in him... Nicodemus recognized that he must be from God, because of his signs. +++ But THIS woman – this lonely, outcaste, Samaritan Woman at the Well – is the first evangelist. All she wants to do is share the Good News – news of the Messiah. She doesn’t pretend to understand everything about him – or about this Living Water he offers – but she does know that it’s what she’s thirsty for. +++ And the people follow her back to Jesus – and many in the village are saved that day, because of her.

This is the point in the story when we need to take a timeout – to stop – and look up to see the milestone this Samaritan Woman has placed along the path of our Lenten Journey – our journey of solitude – our journey of “social isolation.” +++ We get used to our lives the way we live them day after day – we find comfort in repetition – we feel blessed by knowing what to expect. You’ve learned to see God in certain places – in certain rhythms of your day – in certain people – like your loving church family that you get to see each week. You get your fix on Sunday mornings when we get together – and you go home knowing that God is good. +++ But what happens when your rhythms – your places – and your loving people are suddenly taken away from you – ... - as they are NOW? +++ Where will the evidence of God’s love come from? Where will you get the whispers of the grace of Jesus Christ? How will you continue to see and feel the work of the Holy Spirit in your life? +++ +++ Today’s Scripture gives us GOOD NEWS for this scary and disorienting time. The Lord will send the Gospel to you wherever you are, from the most unexpected sources, in the most unexpected ways. Like from a lonely outcast woman who leaves town for drinking water and comes back with the Living Water of Christ – enough to share with everyone. +++ Unexpected places like water gushing from a rock to slake the thirst of Israel... Unexpected places like manna from heaven to fill its starving bellies... Or a stranger, who one day seems to appear out of nowhere – sitting by the edge of well – asking for water. +++ So, this morning, I wonder – while you’re cooped up... in social isolation... wondering how long you can wait before you have to risk going to the store... running out of toilet paper. While you’re longing to rejoin your church family between these 4 walls – or the 4 walls of your own church, if not this one. +++ While you are afraid of how much worse things might get before they get better. +++ I wonder... from what unlikely places does your living water flow? +++ Look around you – in the new rhythms of your day... Look around you – out of your fear of what’s to come... Look around you... at your Wilderness Journey. ... What new and unexpected ways is the Lord reaching out to take this Journey with you? From where is “still small voice” of your savior – offering you a sip of Living Water to soothe your thirsty soul?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.