
The Well in the Wilderness

John 4:5-42

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 9, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

The season of wilderness journeying is on us. We are wandering through a dry and desert time. Perhaps on this wilderness way you find yourself left wondering in what to have hope. Life in this season is so often characterized by desperation, doubt, and despair. This wilderness journey is never for the faint of heart, yet as a community of faith, we find ourselves in the throes of this season of wilderness journeying again. We are familiar with this journey because it is the journey of the season of Lent. And the circular nature of liturgical time brings us on this journey year after year. We walk the well-worn roads that eventually lead us to the cross. We wander along the way that the one who was and is the way-maker walked. And we do so relying on the resources that have carried us through this journey time and again. So we walk this way recognizing the wilderness journey of Lent and the cross we come to at the end do not have the final word for us. So ultimately, we always journey in hope.

Yet, the journey in the wilderness that is familiar to us during the season of Lent has become strange this time around because we also are walking with the whole world on another wilderness way. What began as a virus wreaking havoc on one community in China is now a global pandemic pressing people to places of panic. The wilderness of the coronavirus is marked by doubt, desperation, despair, and for some death. Our health and community leaders and many others besides have been working tirelessly to be good guides on this wilderness way. So community gatherings have been canceled; churches and other faith communities are meeting virtually; our life together as we are used to it has been put on hold. So with this wilderness journey heavy on our hearts and minds, we listen to the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well anew. As we reflect on this story, let us pay particular attention to the gift of life Jesus gives to any who find themselves isolated, alone, fearful, and wondering if God even cares.

The scriptures tell us Jesus has to go through Samaria. Of course, he could have gone another direction. Yet as if something, or better someone, is directing him to the whole world that God loves, Jesus travels from Judea back to Galilee through a Samaritan city called Sychar. The hungry, thirsty, and tired Jesus stops on his way at a well. Jesus is physically weary, but he is poised, like he is throughout John's Gospel, for a divinely inspired encounter. And sure enough, a Samaritan woman—who is given no name in the story—comes in the heat of the day to get her water at the well by which Jesus sits. This socially isolated and socially ostracized woman comes when no one else comes to get what is essential for her life. Anyone with another option, anyone with other means, anyone who can do otherwise arrives for water before the heat of the day takes over—before the waters have been cleared from the shelves by people who have the social and financial luxury of “stocking up.”

Breaking all social and religious customs, Jesus initiates a conversation and opens the door of relationship to this woman. The dialogue between Jesus and this socially marginalized woman makes the way for, what one commentator calls, the “mutual revelation of truth that is fundamental to what relationship really is.”¹ Jesus creates space for community and relationship that is new to

¹ Rolf Jacobson, Karoline Lewis, Joy Moore, and Matt Skinner *Sermon Brainwave*, “Third Sunday in Lent,” podcast audio, March 7, 2020, https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1238.

this socially and religiously marginalized woman. The conversation moves quickly from the purely physical to something that includes, and yet transcends, the physical. Jesus asks for water and then he offers living water—the kind that allows those who drink of it to never have a particular kind of thirst again. Jesus says, “The water that I will give will become in [you] a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” This water is the water of relationship and connection with the living God. This water would be good for anyone, but it is especially good when getting water alone in the heat of the day is a reminder of the wilderness you regularly inhabit or the social isolation from your community that is your daily reality.

We all know of course that there is a kind of social distancing and isolating that is truly about loving and caring for your neighbor. Yet there is also a kind of social distancing and isolating that knows nothing of care for our neighbors or for the vulnerable or isolated or lonely or needy. We recognize there is a kind of isolating that is related to people being told they are not pure enough, whole enough, worthy enough, beautiful enough, lovable enough, clean enough, wealthy enough, or good enough in any way to join the rest of the community. We may well realize that this kind of disconnection and social isolation from community is physical, as well as relational, emotional, and spiritual. And when we realize this, we do well to welcome those who are socially isolated into the kind of community and connection that Jesus offers continually.

The woman at the well becomes a guide for us for how we respond once we recognize the kind of community into which Jesus invites us and all people. After the woman engaged Jesus with deep questions about faith and tradition and the realities of life, Jesus reveals his truest identity to her: Jesus says, “I AM.” Jesus proclaims that he is God in the flesh, the Holy One standing right in her presence offering life in relationship and community. And learning this, the woman leaves to invite others to come and see for themselves, to experience what she has experienced, to be in relationship with the Messiah she has just encountered. The woman invites all the people to experience for themselves the life she has been offered.

The woman experienced the life and relationship offered by Jesus and wanted to share it. She could have hoarded her experience. She could have stocked up in a way that deprived the other vulnerable people of her community from sharing in the gift Jesus offered. But she had been on the wrong side of that social isolation for no loving reason. She had been on the wrong side of being pushed to the margins, so she was not going to follow that path. And perhaps it was out of her experience of being on the outside that she knew how good it was to invite all the people to be within Jesus’ community.

The invitation into Jesus’ community is physical, relational, emotional, and spiritual. In a wilderness time like ours, when the physical aspects of the community Jesus invites us to are appropriately limited—not merely out of fear for ourselves but in care for our neighbors—we would do well to find creative and new ways to remember others who are included in the community offered in Jesus—especially those others who too often are overlooked, ignored, or marginalized. To put a finer point on it, as those called to connection and community in and through Jesus, the mandate for us is to reach out to and connect with any who are isolated, marginalized, lonely, fearful, or regularly forgotten to offer spiritual connection, emotional support and—as needed and appropriate—physical care. Our outreach and in-reach will likely need to be more creative and courageous than it has been in recent memory. Yet be encouraged and hold on to hope because even as we practice social distancing and isolation, our faith reminds us that we are

never alone. You see, the I AM, Jesus, showed up at the well with the socially isolated woman. And Jesus shows up for you, even as we “show up” for one another.

So I encourage you to continue to practice your faith. Live the reality of Christ’s presence with us by walking in the ways, perhaps creatively, that are the ways of trust in God. Turn regularly to things like prayer and scripture reading and gathering (virtually or through technology) in Jesus’ name. And also continue to turn to practices like giving of your time, and talent, and treasure to care for those who are likely forgotten or in need. Turn to practices of caring for your neighbor, of sharing with those without food or shelter, of connecting with the lonely or anxious or afraid, of reconciling with those who have wronged you or you have wronged. Even in a season of wilderness journeying, walk in the ways of faith rather than fear, and live in the reality of hope made real by the one who offered living water to the Samaritan woman that day. And as you continue on the way, the God who showed up at the well offering living water will be present with you today and always. Amen.