

## **Living Waters – Faith in a Time of Challenge**

**(Ex 3:1-7); John 4:5-30**

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden, March 15, 2020*

When my step-daughter Emma and her fiancé Brian visited us last August, they brought along a fascinating board game called *Pandemic*. We had never played it before. It is a cooperative game. In other words, the players are not competing with each other but need to work together to address a potentially global crisis. You have a board displaying a world map with all the capitals of countries marked. All cities are connected with lines, creating a visible web on the board. Each player draws a card that assigns them a certain identity with particular characteristics needed to address the presumed health crisis. The whole team has to determine how and when to use each other's gifts for the good of the whole. For example, if you are the special operations manager (I forget the exact job titles), you have the capacity to send team members to the location where they are most needed. If you are a medic, your presence exponentially and positively affects the rate of patient recovery in your immediate circuit of cities. If you are a research doctor, you are the key to setting up testing labs and finding a cure...You get the picture.

So the four of us set out to play this game. We had to draw other special cards to get set-up. Those cards designated areas with a health crisis to start with, say in Lagos, Nigeria, or Beijing, China, or Washington D.C.. Each disease had its own color. Each round we could make decisions of how to address the situation but each round would also involve drawing further cards which sometimes designated more affected areas, actual outbreaks which automatically spread a disease to all adjoining cities, or a card could even introduce a whole new disease. Each round meant adjusting to constant change and unpredictable developments.

While this game was certainly a hypothetical venture, it was an experiential wake-up call for all four of us about the complexities of addressing local, regional and global health crises. It also left no doubt in my mind that the only chance to address the crisis was to work together with sharp focus and dedication for the good of the whole. There was no sense in arguing, wishful thinking, scapegoating or burying your head in the sand. It was also irrefutably clear that it

didn't matter whether an issue arose in Asia, Africa, Europe or North America. All were affected by each other. Our power came through using the diverse and unique gifts we could each bring to the table, through staying calm and flexible, and by remaining curious about options and possibilities. It was a formidable and sometimes overwhelming challenge.

I find myself going back to that experience a lot these days as we listen to the rapidly changing developments around the COVID-19 pandemic which is now beginning to affect our lives right here in Maine. News from family and friends in Europe also reflects the severity of the crisis. We just made the decision to close our church building to the public and suspend in-person worship and gatherings. That was a hard decision and may seem drastic or premature but we clearly got the message that taking radical steps now was the key to lessening the overall impact of the pandemic. We also felt that our overriding concern needed to be protecting people who are particularly vulnerable. In the absence of adequate testing, treatment options and some key pieces of equipment like ventilators, the last thing we need is to overtax our medical system and health care providers with extra people who are sick.

As we gather in worship, even if remotely, we have the opportunity to remember and experience how our faith can inform our response.<sup>1</sup> Our given Gospel text can guide us in reflecting on what will truly be a source of sustenance and healing for us in these challenging times. The text is richer than we can mine here in one sermon but let me reflect with you on some salient aspects.

Jesus is traveling with his disciples from the southern region around Jerusalem back to his northern home territory in Galilee. His journey takes him through the region of Samaria. As you may recall, Samaritans were spiritual cousins of Jews and shared the common ancestral stories of Abraham, Sarah and their clan but had adopted different additional beliefs and practices. Many Jews felt that the faith of Samaritans was no longer pure because of exposure to foreign gods and customs. Jesus and his disciples arrive in Sy'char near the famous well of their shared

---

<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the week, I was going to talk about the environmental aspects and ramifications of water pollution and how this also impacts especially minority populations in this country.

ancestors Jacob and Joseph. The disciples go off to find food. Jesus meets a woman there around the hottest time of the day. A man, let alone a Jewish man, would not be expected to speak to Samaritan woman. No wonder that the Samaritan woman is so surprised when Jesus asks her for a drink of water (Jn 4:11).

Jesus responds to her surprise by saying, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." This perks the woman's interest and curiosity. "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? (Jn 4:11)."<sup>2</sup> Who can blame her for her literal interpretation? Women were hauling water all the time and still are in many parts of the world. While gathering at the well could also be an occasion for social exchange for the women, it is striking that she comes by herself when the sun is particularly hot at noon time when others likely would not come. More on that in a minute. She wants to know if Jesus is somehow more powerful or wiser than her ancestors. He comments on the water that comes from Jacob's well: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will *become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life*" (Jn 4:13-14)."

The woman immediately asks to drink of the water hoping to never be thirsty again and or to have to return to this well. As important as our literal thirst is (especially in some parts of the world), Jesus steers her in a new direction. He asks about her husbands and current liaison to whom she is not married. This reference to multiple relationships may be a veiled reference to Samaritan's exposure to pagan gods/relationships. In the context of the story, it might be construed as a reason why the woman is alone at the well at an odd hour. Maybe she is being isolated and shunned by other women or generally regarded as impure.

In any case, she realizes that Jesus is a prophet. Further conversation follows in which Jesus is saying that old forms of identifications of faith are falling away as we enter into a direct living

---

<sup>2</sup> This can also remind us Nicodemus, the Pharisee, from last week's text. He, too, struggles to understand Jesus but desires a deeper faith.

relationship with God known as the Trinity of father/mother and son/daughter/Christ (Jn 4:19-24) and Holy Spirit. Father/mother and son/daughter/Christ are constantly exchanging the life-giving flow of love by pouring themselves out into each other. Through this flow, they usher forth the love and power of the Holy Spirit alive in all of us. This intimate and life-giving relationship will be directly available to the woman in the story and to us as we enter the flow of love. It is like life-giving water. Jesus then reveals himself to her be the Messiah (anointed one), the Christ, whom her people are expecting as well. As the story continues, she goes back to her village and cannot help herself but tell others about him, wondering if he is indeed the Messiah. Her sharing brings people out to go and find him (John 4:28-30) and many come to have faith in this love, this life-giving water that will truly quench our thirst.

How might this speak to us? One question that comes to my mind is what kind of well of water, so to speak, do we go to not only to sustain ourselves but to thrive and feel connected? Which kind of water is life-giving and which is not? What are our false refuges and attachments we have to face just like our biblical counterpart did in the story? Many of us are finding out the hard way that staking our security and well-being on our 401K or other financial portfolios is not it! Running to the store to get every last roll of toilet paper, disinfectant, or food item is ultimately not it. It appears that identifying ourselves with our job or company that might struggle amidst a global health and financial crisis is not it. Thinking that we can fully control our daily lives on our own terms if we only plan hard enough and try hard enough is not it. I bet all of us have had a few moments of thinking: "Oh, the best laid plans..."

I can also imagine that many of us have additional concerns about how things will evolve. Will we stay healthy and, if we get the virus, will we be OK? What about a vulnerable loved one? What if the schools close and we need to juggle our work schedule and scramble for child care all the while we are trying to keep our children safe? We are also aware of people potentially suffering from social isolation and lack of access to food or medications. I am not naming these to scare us all but to simply state the real thoughts and feelings that people are having. We

must be honest and direct about that. We will all need to work together creatively to address those needs when they arise.

The good news is that we are a living community and will be here for each other. The Messiah / Christ is not simply a remote figure of history but our own lived identity when we come together in love. While there may be days that feel like the hard work of drawing up water by hand from a deep well little by little at the most inhospitable time of the day, we are also invited to trust that we can experience God's life-giving love more freely and abundantly. It is precisely by daring to feel for each other and for people who are struggling even far away from us that the love will flow. When one of us suffers, we all share in that suffering in solidarity. Our hearts grow from such compassion and shared commitment. When we dare to love amidst fear, the living water not only wells up more freely but it allows all of us to expand together into a vessel by the power and grace of God's Holy Spirit. This challenge is stripping us from attachment to false securities. It also challenges us to rise up and support each other. Let us embrace it together.

Let me close with a beautiful poem by Lynn Ungar in response to the Pandemic which also gives the poem its name (thanks Mimi B. for sending it!). I realize that it may not alleviate fear around livelihood but I think at its heart its message is powerful and enduring about how we can be present at this time and in this place we call home:

*Pandemic*

*What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath —  
the most sacred of times?  
Cease from travel.  
Cease from buying and selling.  
Give up, just for now, on trying to make the world*

*different than it is.*

*Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.*

*Center down.*

*And when your body has become still,  
reach out with your heart.*

*Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.*

*(You could hardly deny it now.)*

*Know that our lives are in one another's hands.*

*(Surely, that has come clear.)*

*Do not reach out your hands.*

*Reach out your heart.*

*Reach out your words.*

*Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.*

*Promise this world your love —*

*for better or for worse,*

*in sickness and in health,*

*so long as we all shall live.*

*— Lynn Ungar 3/11/20*

May it be so and may we trust that it is God's life-giving waters of love, compassion and generosity that will sustains us. Amen.