

3rd Sunday in Lent (Year A)

John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, '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.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I 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.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labour.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'

If you're joining us now for the first time in the season of Lent, I'll share with you that our Lenten theme this year is "Wilderness." Which is fitting, of course, in ways that we didn't realize at the time we chose that theme. We are in a wilderness of our own right now, as a community. There are a few of us here in this sanctuary but, chances are that you're most likely listening to or reading or watching this sermon from your home or someplace *other* than this sanctuary. Of course, that's because we're taking serious precautions right now to limit the spread of the coronavirus.

Not surprisingly, the term quarantine has been in the news a lot lately. Especially the phrase of "self-quarantining." In fact, by cancelling in-person worship today for the congregation, we are encouraging people to self-quarantine in an effort to protect themselves and one another.

Well, the woman in today's passage from John's Gospel self-quarantined herself to protect herself from a virus. No, not a virus like the coronavirus; not a physical one, at least. She self-quarantined herself to protect from a different kind of virus, a virus no less hurtful than the one that's going around the world right now. The virus she was protecting herself from was the virus of gossip and fierce judgment.

The evidence of her self-quarantine? The strategic time that she chose to go to the well. You see, people who *weren't* the target of such vitriolic gossip came to the well in the early morning hours, long before the heat of the sun began its worst assault. They came to the well (you might think of it as the office cooler) to get water but also to gossip. And she knew that they were talking about her.

And so, she quarantined herself to the well by the harsh midday sun, well after everyone else had sought the refuge of the indoors. She came to the well to be alone. She came to the well to practice an extreme form of social distancing.

Only today was different. As she approached the well, she saw a man waiting there. She considered her options. She could continue with her business and hope the gentleman wasn't in a chatty mood. Or, she could turn around and come back later. But she had already come so far and the heat was so brutal, she took a deep breath and kept walking toward the well.

But as she came near the well, her hopes were dashed. The man, the one whom we know as Jesus, initiated a conversation with her. And that fact alone is remarkable because it would have been a HUGE societal taboo. Barbara Brown Taylor describes it best when she says the following:

Jesus talks longer to the woman at the well than he does to anyone else in all the Gospels - longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his accusers, longer than he talks to any of his own family. She is the first person he reveals himself to in the Gospel of John. She is the first outsider to guess who he is and tell others. She is the first evangelist, John tells us, and her testimony brings many to faith.

Jesus' choice of her is a curious one, because when I say outsider, I mean outsider. The woman at the well was a triple outsider. In the first place, she was a Samaritan, which made her a half-breed and full pagan as far as the purists were concerned.

She was also, of course, a woman. In Jesus' time, women were not what you would call liberated. They were not even allowed to worship with men, whose morning devotions included the prayer, "Thank God I am not a woman."

Women had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially not by holy men, who did not speak to their own wives in public. One group of pious men was known as "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses.

She was a Samaritan and a woman, but that was not all. She was also a fallen woman. Respectable women made their trips to the well in the morning, when they could greet one another and talk about the news. But this woman was one of the people they talked about, and the fact that she showed up at noon was a sure sign that she was not welcome at their morning social hour.¹

So, Jesus decided in this moment to break down barriers with this woman who had quarantined herself because of the hurtful judgment of her community. Instead of supporting her, they ridiculed her. Instead of listening to her, they hurled insults behind her back.

In the nearly 2,000 of interpretation of this text, the consensus (mostly offered by men, I might add) is that this woman must have been promiscuous. 2,000 years of slut-shaming has made us assume that the reason this woman had five husbands and was living with someone whom she was not married to was because she "got around."

But I'm here to tell you that there's no evidence that this was the case. What is more likely is that she had so many husbands for a very different reason. What is equally, if not more, likely than the possibility of her being promiscuous was the possibility of her suffering from infertility. It is very likely that she was passed from husband to husband after it became clear to each that they struggled to conceive. And remember, back in those days, a woman without a husband had to resort to either a life of prostitution and/or homelessness.

That being said, we would do well to push back against 2,000 years of patriarchal sexism and open our minds a little bit as to why this woman might feel the need to avoid the judgement of her surrounding community.

That being said, it is a curious observation of today's text that Jesus doesn't seem to be preoccupied with *why* this woman is the target of such shame-filled gossip. He instead seems to focus on engaging with her when no one else wants to.

Instead of obeying the societal norms, Jesus, a Jew, speaks to the woman, a Samaritan. Instead of giving her judgment, Jesus offers her living water. Instead of hanging out with people in the cool morning hours by the well, he chose the hot midday time. In other words, I think Jesus very intentionally chose the time that he went

¹<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2008-02/identity-confirmation>

to the well. I think he knew that he might find someone who was in need of community. He chose that time because he knew he would meet someone in the margins who needed compassion, love, and living water.

This past week has been a crazy one, to say the least. The concerns about the coronavirus have affected almost every aspect of our lives. In some ways, this past week has been a potent reminder of just how much we depend on one another for, well, everything. And you know what? That's not a bad thing. That's just the way that God made us: to be in community with one another.

But today, like Jesus did in today's passage, we must be even *more* intentional about creating community with one another in new ways.

Perhaps now is the time to ask the following question: who is the "woman at the well" that needs a supportive community right now?

Is it the elderly person who does not have access to the internet who needs to be checked on more frequently?

Is it the child who doesn't know where her next lunch is coming from because school is out for at least the next two weeks?

Is it the Kroger worker who has to settle disputes over people literally fighting over toilet paper?

Is it the nurse at Central Baptist hospital who is working overtime?

Is it the persons who clean our church building who are working diligently to keep our facilities clean?

Ask yourself this question in these difficult and scary times: who has God put in my life who needs a supportive community and what is one thing I can do to make them feel included and loved?

Jesus ended the woman's quarantine. And so should we.

Now, to state what I hope is obvious, I'm *not* suggesting that we disobey the numerous experts who are encouraging us to practice social distancing and self-quarantine. I'm talking about a *different* kind of quarantine. A type of quarantine that existed before the coronavirus and is only exacerbated by its pandemic.

You and I have been given the gift of community. Following Jesus in this wild wilderness of Lent, it's up to us as to how we are going to practice it. So do your part to be the beloved community even and especially in this time of social disorientation.

- Do not give into panic. Trust in God's providence while simultaneously listening to the medical and scientific experts who are encouraging us to take these steps to keep one another safe. Stay informed but don't forget to periodically turn off the news and do something else: read a book, binge-watch a TV show, exercise, or play a game.
- Stay connected. Call a friend or a congregant. Check in on one another. See what you can do to help. Be the beloved community that God has called us to be.

- Finally, keep practicing generosity. Some folks are lucky enough to have jobs that provide paid leave for times such as this. However, many do not have that benefit and are struggling financially right now. Please keep supporting your local non-profits, like God's Pantry, who depend on your generosity to provide much needed services.

So friends, the wilderness continues. Remember that the wilderness is where we learn together. This wilderness can at first look like a place of isolation but, as today's story teaches us, if we just practice a little intentionality and curiosity, this wilderness can and will be a place of unexpected connection!

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's people, say: **Amen.**