

“Fountain of Living Waters”

John 4:5-30

The Rev. Nancy Conklin

Second Sunday in Lent

March 5, 2023

Jeremiah is often referred to as the weeping prophet due to his very challenging call to ministry. For 40 years he preached, as he wrote, “to stubborn and stony hearts.” Jeremiah wept for love of God’s people as they persisted in their idolatrous ways and brought God’s judgment upon themselves. Through Jeremiah, God expressed God’s own profound dismay and grief over how, in spite of all God had done to create, redeem, establish, protect, and provide for God’s people, they abandoned God and sought their protection and prosperity in the false “gods” of the nations around them. We heard Jeremiah give voice to God’s pained exasperation:

*Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

A remarkable statement. God lays open the human heart and shows us what sin really looks like when we, who have been created in God’s own image, forsake the very Source of Life. Sin is trying to satisfy our deepest thirst for life anywhere but in God. Yet God did not leave us to perish beside our broken cisterns. Although we forsook God to live a desolate and bone-dry existence, God, rich in mercy, didn’t forsake us. God sent us Jesus to be the Fountain of Living Water, becoming for us the well-spring of eternal life.

In our gospel story this morning, we find Jesus sitting in the noonday heat beside a well in Samaria. He appears to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Though Jews and Samaritans worshipped the same God, they disagree on where and how to practice their faith. Their distaste and distrust for one another was so deep that, 200 years earlier, the Samaritans had joined forces with the Syrians against the Judeans, at which time the Judeans destroyed the Samaritan temple. Ever since that day, Judean Jews did not venture into Samaria nor willingly associate with Samaritans.

Not only does Jesus appear to be in the wrong place, he is also sitting beside Jacob’s well in the scorching heat of the day. As part of their daily routine, women would go and draw water from the town well, early in the morning or later in the evening when the weather was cooler. It turns out that is precisely why this particular Samaritan woman made her way to Jacob’s well at noon — to avoid the stares and whispers of the other woman in her village who have branded her with a scarlet letter because of her history with men. A history, Jesus himself, had come to know. What we don’t know is the exact nature of her relationships. Like the town gossips, we are prone to thinking that this nameless woman had been married and cast out by five different men, but John doesn’t tell us that. It is more likely that her previous husbands had died, and under the law she was obligated to marry her husband’s brother. Even if she was divorced five times, only men could divorce women; women could not divorce their husbands. Quite possibly, this Samaritan woman was a victim of men who used her for a time and then dismissed her at will. In any scenario, she was subjected to humiliation and ostracized from the community to live a desolate

and bone-dry existence. That is, until she arrived at the well and found the Fountain of Life sitting beside it.

As she began to draw water, Jesus did the most amazing thing: he asked her for a drink. Jesus knew that drinking the water she would give him would bind him to her in the same way he bound himself to tax collectors and sinners and all the other undesirables with whom he had associated (had even dared to break bread with them). Like them, Jesus did not shame this woman, nor pronounce her in need of repentance. He looked upon her with the eyes of compassion and offers her the lifegiving waters of new life. Even though, she would know, like any Jew, Samaritan, or Judean, that “living water” was a biblical metaphor for grace, she wasn’t quite sure about this strange man sitting before her at the wrong place and the wrong time. She chooses to be flippant, that wonderful defense mechanism we are tempted to use when we’re not ready to be open and honest before our Lord. And so, she bates Jesus: “Give me this water, anything’s better than having to risk public humiliation every day.” Piercing her defenses, Jesus issues his invitation: “Go and call your husband.” The moment of decision. Will she walk away, this encounter becoming all too intimate, too revealing? Or, will her shame give voice to the horrible person others have made her out to be? Will she lie or attempt to rationalize the life she now lives? Is Jesus scanning her face to see the true condition of her soul? Her heart, bound in shame, speaks, “I have no husband.” Infinitely more patient with us than we ever are with ourselves, Jesus challenges us to look a little more closely, not in condemnation, but to begin to peel away the layers that we might see how we are trying to find the Source of Life anywhere and everywhere but in God. Jesus does not shame her, nor pronounce her in need of repentance. Hearing, he reaches out in compassionate love and offers her the gift of living water that would become in her a spring of water welling up to eternal joy.

Aware of her deep thirst for new life, this Samaritan woman wanted to know where was she to go to find this living water. On the mountaintop? In the temple? Jesus says, “Go deep into the well of your own soul. God who is Spirit and Truth awaits you there. Seek the truth about God and the truth about yourself, and God will provide you with all the grace you need to change your life.”

Experiencing Jesus’ transformational love, she comes to believe that his is the long-awaited Messiah – the Savior of the World. A conclusion based upon the fact that he told her everything she had ever done. An indication, that although this is the longest conversation recorded in the New Testament, what we have heard is only a synopsis of a much longer conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. We can imagine that, during her time with Jesus, this woman at the well had poured out her heart and soul to him. As he listened, Jesus heard the honesty and sincerity in her voice and witnessed the humility of her spirit in his presence.

Humility is the willingness to make an honest and sincere assessment of ourselves in the presence of our Lord, that he might reveal the ways in which we are trying to satisfy our deepest thirst for life anywhere but in God. Becoming aware of our need for the Fountain of Living Waters, we drink deeply and receive a well-spring of eternal life.