

Transfiguration
Dallas, Texas

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

Did you know, there is a real Jacob's well? It actually exists. A Greek Orthodox church has been built atop it, but it's still very much there. And you can go there, and sit atop it, just like Jesus, and lower a bucket down into its depths to pull up a drink of its water.

The well and the church are today found in Nablus, a Palestinian city nestled at the foot of Mount Gerizim, where Samaritan people still live. That's another thing that I wonder if you know – that Samaritans aren't just characters from out of legend; they are real, and they still live on the mountainside just up from the well Jacob dug long ago, and from which you can still draw a drink of cold water on a hot day.

Today's story is one of my favorites in the gospels, and not only because I've had the privilege of drinking from the well. It's one of my favorites, because it's so full of surprises, surprises that have meaning and significance for us today, all these years later, including in such times as these. And those surprises start with the Samaritan woman.

You may already know this, but it's important to understand just how shocking it is that Jesus talks with her. It's impossible to overstate it: no self-respecting Jewish man would have spoken so forwardly with a woman he didn't know, let alone a strange *Samaritan* woman. It just wasn't done.

And not only is she a strange, Samaritan woman, she's a woman with a complicated story. Even without knowing her marital history, for her to be at the well alone at noon meant that she didn't feel able to go to the well in the morning with all the other local women, because that's when they would have been there. I guess you could say this was the original form of social distancing – and not the kind focused on preventing sickness or keeping people healthy. This was that other, “judgier” kind of social distancing. Maybe she was some sort of Biblical Elizabeth Taylor, or maybe her story is more tragedy than scandal, as a woman in that day and age would have had five husbands only by being widowed or dismissed by those husbands into near destitution. So we don't know her full story, but we can safely assume that she is a complicated person and well acquainted with the hardship of life. Which makes her wonderfully real.

And that beautiful human complexity helps us understand the next of the story's big surprises. Despite her complicated past, Jesus obviously respects her. Did you know that this is the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in any of the

gospels? Think about that. Longer than any recorded conversation with one of the disciples. Longer than any dialogue with any religious or political leader, including the long nighttime meeting with Nicodemus that we heard last week. No one receives more time on stage with Jesus in the gospels than this nameless Samaritan woman with a complicated past.

Which is one more reminder that no matter how complicated our story is, how much off-course things seem to have gotten in our lives, how far we are today from who we thought we would be when we grew up, Jesus has time for us. Lots of time for us. All the time for us. He's not in a hurry. And what's more, we don't have to play games with him, either. He already knows. He knows the backstory of how we got here. He knows the things we're proud of, and also the things we try to hide. He knows all that. And still he wants nothing more than to sit down and talk. He sidles up to the bar of our souls and says, "Give me a drink." Which is his way of saying, "Tell me all about it."

But here's the thing. And this is important. Just like with the woman at the well, after listening to what we have to say, what he has to offer back may not be what we think we want. That's another of the story's beautiful surprises. Jesus says he has living water to offer, and she quickly imagines this could be the solution to her problems. No more bothering with the effort and embarrassment of coming to the well at noon. No more lugging water up the mountain. "Where is this living water?" she asks, ready to sign the dotted line.

Because she assumes, at least at first, the same thing many of us do. She thinks that if Jesus is here to help, it must have something to do with making our lives more comfortable and convenient. And if it doesn't have that sort of practical application to my life....well, what good is it? What good is living water that doesn't fill a bucket or quench my thirst? What good is a messiah who doesn't solve my problems?

I mean, who wouldn't want a messiah who offers us – oh, I don't know – living hand sanitizer, gushing with disinfecting power in every sickened corner of the world. Or living vaccination, inoculating us against every strange virus and disease and solving every health crisis. It would be nice if Jesus was more practical like that.

But that's not what he offers. He offers what we need, rather than what we think we want, which is why his living water is far more than a momentary bit of practical assistance, it is the power of the grace of God. And grace, as Philip Yancey puts it, "like water, flows downward...No matter how low we sink, grace flows to that lowest part."¹ The low points of life, the hardest circumstances, the darkest hours, are where the grace of God pools and collects.

¹ Philip Yancey, *What Good is God? In Search of a Faith that Matters* (Jericho Books, 2013) ch. 7.

That's the last, and most important, surprising thing about this story, and frankly, it's one of the most wonderfully surprising things about Jesus, period. We think of Jesus on the mountaintop, literally and figuratively, up there on the heights, where things are good and beautiful and happy. But the grace he offers, like water, flows downward, down to the lowest point in our lives, because those are the times and places where we need it most. The times when life has taken a sharp turn downward and we don't understand how we got here or what to do. The times when we feel overwhelmed and anxious and afraid. The goodness of God flows right down into all those corners and crevices, giving courage when we're afraid, giving hope when we're feeling lost, and reminding us that there is nowhere we can go that is separated from the love of God.

So I know you're not here with me right now, where you should be. And I know we're all feeling the weight of this strange crisis, with all its uncertainty and difficulties. But if we let it, the living water of Jesus will flow right into those lowest points, and do what only it can. It's something the Apostle Paul understood when he wrote these words nearly 2,000 years ago, words that have rung with God's truth in every crisis and hardship through the generations, including this one, and will remain true wherever and whenever the next crisis happens:

“We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5:2-5).”

Friends, I don't know what the next few days will hold, or when we'll be together again. I don't know how this crisis will resolve, or when. But I know for certain that Jesus is particularly good at overcoming social distancing, and I know that his grace, like water, flows downward. So as you wait out this crisis, be on the lookout for Jesus, who is ready to sidle up to the bar of your soul and offer you a drink.