

“Is the Lord Among Us or Not?”

John 4:5-26

Third Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I suppose there's anticipation to hear a sermon relevant to the Coronavirus that's consuming so much of our lives, so in 60 seconds, here it is:

In the Old Testament, when God allowed pestilence and disaster to plague his people, the prophet declared the Word of the Lord, “Call a solemn assembly. Gather the children, even the nursing infants. Repent and turn to the Lord.” In our day, society's leaders say, “Do not gather; do not call upon the Lord. It might be dangerous.” The foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men.

(Update: Calvary has decided not to gather in public assembly this Sunday or next, *not* because it is ‘too dangerous,’ but – *with faith in the God* over all three estates of His creation – in voluntary support of the effort of the government to protect the nation and provide for the common good.)

We ought be understanding that there *are* times the Church may not gather for the Sacrament. If I fall ill in the days or weeks ahead, will a pastor be readily available? But there's nothing Satan would love more than for us to be distracted from the news of Christ's march to the cross, the news of Christ's resurrection from the tomb. But, with Christ's death is victory

over sin; with his resurrection is victory over death... and that means he's Lord over Coronavirus!

So, we will fix our eyes (and our distracted minds and our anxious hearts) on Jesus and the gospel reading and true sermon he has for us today.

Our text, Jesus answered her, "If you know 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."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In our Old Testament reading, the place of the rock at Horeb is called Massah and Meribah, as the people of Israel had lived in doubt whether God was with them: "Is the Lord among us or not?" As is the case, the Old Testament points forward to a greater reality, and Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well reminds us that all of history – including among us Christians – we continually live with this sinful doubt, this wondering "Is the Lord with us or not?" And, frankly, we live with such a question because we forget the promises of the baptismal life.

Last week, Jesus taught Nicodemus about the creation of faith out of nothing in the Spirit's work through baptismal waters. In the verses between that text and this, St John records John the Baptist preparing to decrease, that the coming Christ may increase and all the people may look to him. And, in those verses, John says, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from

heaven” (might remind you of what Jesus said to Nicodemus last week), and then the text at the end of chapter 3 makes this commentary: “He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

That propels us into our text this morning, a text that is right on the heels of Jesus and his disciples baptizing the crowds (much like John had prepared the people by way of baptism), and here again our text this morning focuses on *water* and the *faith* that springs up from and through that water: “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,” Jesus says. “He continues, “Everyone who drinks of this water (from Jacob’s well) will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Now, obviously, there is enough detail in there to show that Jesus is speaking not with blueprint prescription about baptismal rite procedures (we don’t “drink the water”) but rather with some theological description of the baptismal life... for the baptismal life is the life of the Spirit, that life first poured out in baptism and that life that wells up, springs up, grows up into Christian faith and the joy of worshipping in spirit and truth.

Seeing this as a description of the baptismal life is very important because Jesus speaks to *an outcast*... a woman who comes to the well at the sixth hour (noon) is an outcast of society (we learn *why* she is an outcast later, when we hear about her infidelities regarding the marriage estate). But, we also are reminded – and it’s a big part of this text – that she is a Samaritan. Recall that Samaritans were “half-Jews;” their northern tribe forefathers had assimilated into Assyrian culture and, after hundreds of years, were quite comfortable with meshing their religious roots as children of Israel with pagan religions and religious practices. So, on the one hand, they could appeal to “our father Jacob” (and his well) and they could still “know that Messiah is coming, and when he comes, he will tell us all things”... while, at the same time, coming up with worship practices like worshipping at Mt Gerizim, where – 400 years earlier – they had built a temple to rival/replace that of Jerusalem. You could say it was a sort of “have our cake and eat it too” theology and practice of worship – a “we’ll do it our own way and claim it’s still the right way.” Sounds all too American, doesn’t it?

Indeed, read through this text and one sees how much Jesus could have been interacting with you and me, just as with that Samaritan woman. Yes, “the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans;” but, even more true is it that the holy ought have no dealings with the unholy. You and I, in our sin, are – apart from baptismal faith – the outcasts!, the unholy who have no business

being met in life by God Most High. We have no business thinking we deserve to interact with him or engage him. And, perhaps it's because we instinctively *know that* that we always seem to think/speak/live life on a very earthly plane (a level of life we assume the holy God has no dealings with, don't we – as in, “What say does God have re: a viral pandemic?”) - and are therefore unwilling/unable to recognize that God very graciously and mercifully is in fact dealing with us and calling us to understand life not on our “earthly” terms, but his divine, merciful terms.

Yes, every response Jesus has for the woman seems to highlight that he is speaking on one plane, she is speaking on another – almost like two ships passing in the night, or (like we said last week) Jesus speaking of being born from above while Nicodemus could only think about entering a womb a second time.

Here, Jesus begins by pointing out, “If you knew the gift of God, or who it is that [is speaking with you], you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” What a basic starting point! Do we not have to admit that so many live life not knowing the gift of God, not having any understanding of the Divine One who speaks to them through His holy Word. If the people could understand that, would they not come running from all neighborhoods? Would the church pews not be packed with people saying, “I will give up everything, I will risk anything, if I have chance to receive from God *eternal life* and hear him speak and receive from

him divine gifts!" But, sadly, the world does not know who it is... you and I, in our sin, often *forget* who it is, who gathers us together to serve us living water, living Word, living bread... and so, the world says, "I don't see where/how this helps me now. I don't see the value of this relationship. I'll appeal to capitalism and Americana and entertainment and science and the almighty dollar, because at least I see where they have left us a gift!" Not unlike us Americans, the Samaritan woman says, "You have nothing to draw water with; the well is deep. What kind of benefit can you possibly provide? Jacob and our forefathers gave us this well... how can you compare?"

Jesus responds by again challenging the comforts that we know, challenging the earthly benefits we idolize: "Everyone who drinks of *this* water will be thirsty again (isn't that like when he says, "don't build up for yourselves treasures that moth can eat and rust can destroy and thieves break in and steal.") Yes," Jesus says, "I have something far better for you – whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

"Sounds great!," the woman says, "then I don't need to come to this well anymore." Isn't that the earthly shortsightedness with which the masses respond. The Church is all a value proposition of how it will make earthly life easier, better, more efficient: "Youth groups? Sounds great – then I won't also have to take my kids to the scouts. Group activities? Sounds great – then I won't have to make

friends elsewhere. Lutheran scholarships? Sounds great – then I won't have to pay full tuition." Well, that's not the point of Christ's gospel, is it? It's not the life he's given the Church. He's given us a life not in which we plunge our buckets into the well and however much effort we get out of pulling up the water is how much benefit we get! Rather, he's given us a life that springs up for us (interesting, the word for 'spring of water' and 'well' is the same word – πηγη – the woman only saw that for which she had to work; Jesus described that which God freely gives through the work of the Spirit. Almost like last week's "born again" versus "born from above.") Jesus freely gives us life on a whole higher plane... not for us to ask, "How does it make my earthly life easier?", but "how does it redefine all of life and actually give to me eternal life?" But sadly, the woman – like all of us at times – can only think of earthly benefits: "I don't want to be thirsty again and have to keep coming back to this well. If you can give me some miraculous shortcut to life in this fallen world, great! A stockpile of water bottles? Wonderful! Divine indoor plumbing? I'll take it!"

Now Jesus gets to the point: who is it to whom you are speaking? Who is it with whom *you, Christian*, are "negotiating" your daily life?! That's the question we so easily forget, isn't it?... treating Jesus as an equal, when the unholy sinner deserves to have no dealings with the holy God!

Jesus proves his point by explaining to the woman that he knows she does not live with a husband, though she's had five. He stuns her with the truth that he knows her past and her present... *nothing* is hidden from his sight. (Like Nathanael, to whom Jesus said, "I saw you as you sat under the tree!").

Now the woman is awestruck; is she wowed by Jesus' appeal to omniscience, or is she repenting? The answer is "yes." When we are struck anew with the truth that Christ knows all things, that whether we were on the highest mountain or in the deepest sea, we cannot hide from him, that truth induces our repentance, doesn't it? If I cannot hide from the holy God, then what can I do but repent? If only we would remember that each and every day. Indeed, how much better would we remember it if we began each day with baptismal remembrance, immersed each day in prayer, daily recited the Ten Commandments (which is also echoed in the Lord's Prayer!)... how quickly it would move us to repentance and to rejoice that he has freely given us salvation from the line of the Jews, a salvation in which we may worship in spirit and in truth.

Yes, there is such thing as right worship. Don't take my word for it, take Jesus' word, who says that we worship *in truth*. There are false worshippers, those who do not beg before the holy God, but those who either try to woo him with their merits and praises or who worship false unholy gods. But, there *is* right worship... worshipping in truth... and such worship in truth is worship in the spirit (not

spiritual, such as ethereal worship on the mountain tops or in virtual reality), but spiritual meaning “from/by/of the Spirit of truth, who gave us life in baptism and now continues to breathe the life of Christ into our hearts through the Word and Sacraments.” To worship in spirit and truth is not to say that there is no longer a location to gather for worship, it is to say the location is whichever altar and wherever the Lord promises to come in Word and Sacrament, that we might have life that springs up with the living water which is the life once given us in baptism and now sustained in the baptismal life.

And to put an exclamation point on this – when the woman says, “Yeah, I believe in Messiah, I’ll listen to Christ when he gets here” – Jesus says, “I who speak to you am he.” Except, in the Greek, he says, “I AM (εγω ειμι) – I AM... the one speaking to you.” In other words, look no further. Do not ask, “Is the Lord among us or not.” Most definitely: “The Lord is among us!” The holy God has deigned to dwell with unholy sinners, to safeguard us in life’s trials and save us from sin’s grave. He has given himself upon the cross for unholy sinners and allowed his side to be opened that the living waters may flow freely, stained holy with his blood. What reason we have to openly repent of our sins and ask him to freely give us these living waters of faith... the faith that has been called into existence in the baptismal life.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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