

LENT 3, A – March 15, 2020
SCRIPTURES – Ps. 84; Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-8; John 4:5-39

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.” (John 4:10)

It’s rather interesting to me that, with all of the sheltering in place and canceling of events that is going on right now in order to avoid contact with people and limit the spread of the corona virus, we have the story this morning of Jesus going out of His way to come into contact with “infected” people. I say “infected” people because that’s how the Jewish people in Jesus’ day looked upon the Samaritan people. We look upon those who are sick with pity and concern, and yet avoid them if they are infectious. The Jews considered the Samaritans infectious, and looked upon them with disgust. You see, although the Samaritan people were similar to the Jewish people in most ways, their faith and worship differed in significant ways from the faith and worship that God had given to Moses. The Jews therefore considered them to be corrupted. Samaritans were “infectious;” and so, they were despised and avoided.

Now, this didn’t mean that Jews never ran into them. Samaria was a region within Israel that lay between Galilee in the north and Judea and its capital, Jerusalem, in the south (as New Jersey is between New England and Washington). Jews usually traveled around Samaria when traveling between Galilee and Judea. But, if someone from Galilee was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem for a special feast he would consider traveling through Samaria, as that way was shorter. He would do so as quickly as possible, however, and would avoid towns and contact with Samaritan people.

What’s interesting with Jesus is that He was traveling from Judea to Galilee, and there was no need to get there more quickly. He chose to go through Samaria. He sought out contact with the “infectious” Samaritans. This was way out of the ordinary, and would offer just one more reason for the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders to view Him as dangerous – as “infectious” – and oppose Him.

Why did Jesus do this? He tells us in the words He spoke to the Samaritan woman he met: ***“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... whoever drinks of [this] water will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”***

We have a Savior who will not be put off by us or kept away from us; not by germs and infectious disease, nor by that which is so much worse: the sins that we have and that we spread; sins that separate us from each other and distance us from God. In fact, He came to expose Himself to our sins; to take their separation, their shame, and the eternal judgment they threaten upon Himself.

And so, Jesus traveled through Samaria and spent time with the Samaritans, even though this would result in even more disdain and rebuke from the Jewish leaders who distrusted Him. He sought out and entered into a conversation with a Samaritan woman who was one of the worst sinners among them. Notice: she did not mention her many husbands, nor that she was currently living with a man to whom she was not married. Jesus brought this up and exposed her sins. And, when she tried to avoid their shame by flattering Him and getting His focus off of her and onto a theological discussion – **“Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”** – He pointed out her sin in that, also: **“You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.”** Then, He drew her back to the gift He had and desired to give: **“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.”** He would not be swayed from that which was of the greatest importance: drawing near to her and bringing, not condemnation, but the water of life, that she might drink of it and have the forgiveness of sins and peace with God that are the essence of eternal life!

This, ultimately, is why I decided to not suspend church Services for the time being, or even to temporarily withhold Holy Communion. Jesus, the victor over sin and death and every affliction of this fallen and sin-corrupted world, comes to us here! He goes out of His way to come into contact with us “infected” people that He might bring to us the gift of God, His living water. And, by the way, what is His gift, His living water? Two prophecies from the Old Testament, which speak of God pouring out water upon His people, tell us clearly:

- Isaiah 44:2-3: “Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.”
- Ezekiel 36:25-28. Here God promises the people of Israel – people who, because of their sins, were living as slaves in Babylon – a future day of great deliverance: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you... I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

The promised gift of God is the Holy Spirit! And so, John the Baptist said that when the Messiah came, **“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** The book of Acts in the New Testament records the fulfillment of this, as every reference in Acts to God’s gift, especially when it is connected to water, is to the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17)

Among us is Jesus: the true and holy Word of God incarnate, speaking forgiveness and life to us who are surrounded and threatened by disease and sin and

death. Among us is Jesus: one God with the Father and the Holy Spirit, pouring out His Holy Spirit upon us and filling us. His holiness does not guarantee life and health in this world. No, we are subjected to the diseases and sins and sorrows that afflict others. Jesus Himself was not spared them. He faced them, and died and then rose in triumph over them, to bring to us an eternal life which will one day destroy them all and raise us to heaven. And His people over the centuries have yearned for the Lord's gift of His Holy Spirit and so sought out His water of life, especially in times of plague and persecution. Many laid down their lives to have it. Those who do not believe in Him have no understanding of this or of why we do what we do. They have never agonized over not having visited and brought Christ's body and blood to one who was sick, and then who suddenly died, as I have. How can I shut our doors and withhold Christ's and the Holy Spirit's living and life-giving presence in His holy worship from those whose health is not weakened or threatened, and so should stay away, and desire to come and receive it?

St. Paul's words to the Romans – our Epistle reading this morning – are very fitting to close with: "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" – the water of eternal life! – "who has been given to us." Amen.