

“The Familiar and the Unfamiliar”

Sermon on Sunday, March 15, 2020

Based on John 4

The first thing that strikes me about this story recorded in John 4 is how John assumes his readers have a certain familiarity with the landscape. He says Jesus came to this city called Sychar near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. “Ah, that plot,” you say, “I know exactly what you’re talking about!” (Just kidding). And then he points to the main landmark: Jacob’s well, a source of water, a place of gathering, a place of community. Unlike us, some of John’s readers may have been able to picture this water well, may have even known the area around it. This was after all still a pretty small world. It reminds me of my own upbringing in a small village where people referred to certain properties with the names of the local owners. And having grown up in a small place like that I can tell you it is comforting and reassuring to be able to know who is who and which property belongs to which family. It gives you a very clear understanding of who you are and where you’re from.

Well, in these strange days of the coronavirus nothing is quite as familiar as it used to be, right? Our schools have closed; our beloved church has closed for two weeks; gyms have closed; hand sanitizer is taken (stolen) from church bathrooms... You turn on the TV and your favorite sports have been suspended. It is as if someone issued a new Lenten discipline for us: give up community life for Lent! Give up watching sports for Lent! Or children, how about this? Give up school for Lent! I guess not everything is bad for everyone during these times, there are some silver linings... But it is definitely unfamiliar territory for us and some of the uncertainties are frightening. What if this virus hangs around? What if I get it? What if we can’t get it under control soon? The unfamiliar is not comforting. Not at all!

When Jesus met this woman at the well in the Samaritan town of Sychar - on her own turf, in her familiar environment, he was the stranger, he was the one unsettling her world because he was unlike anyone she knew. This Jewish teacher was strangely nonchalant about social rules. He just talked to her, which in those days was as weird as a stranger talking to your kids without introduction is considered weird in our days.

And it gets increasingly odd for the Samaritan lady. In the course of the conversation, the rabbi turns more mysterious by the minute and the conversation more confusing. They seem to talk about the same words and yet they talk about entirely different things. “What?” the woman wonders, “is water not simply water anymore that quenches your thirst?” “Yes,” Jesus says, “but it is more than that. I am talking about water that quenches the thirst of your soul.” And on it goes. Back and forth. They talk about the same words and mean different things. To top it off, this stranger seems to have knowledge of her private affairs. By this time most women in our time would call the police. “I have a stalker on my hands!” But even in those days, she must have wondered: where did this man learn his manners? You don’t bring up a woman’s former husbands in your first conversation! Everything that was familiar to her – the social rules, the manners, religious rituals, and holy places – he doesn’t seem to play it by any of her rules. And yet, between the lines we get the sense that this woman intuitively knew that the visiting rabbi was on her side, pointing her to a well much deeper than any other she had drawn from in her life. And that well of spiritual life was right in front of her, disguised in this mysterious man!

Whenever we are confronted with things we don’t know much about, things we can’t figure out or explain, we tend to get nervous. Change may be in order and change – especially a change of thinking - is never easy, it pushes us out of the familiar (just like when a pastor who carefully scripts all his sermons goes on Facebook Live – scary!!!) And just like the woman, we wonder, do we understand what’s right in front of us? And are the things we thought we knew the same anymore?

Certainly, our current situation, which has the words “National Emergency” written all over it, is unsettling. In addition to the increasing number of people who are infected, we worry about all who are affected by the crisis. Some people may lose jobs or a significant portion of their income. We can’t judge yet just how severely this will impact everybody. We don’t know how long the uncertainties will hang over us, hangover our schools and churches, hangover stock markets and civic life in all its forms. Heck, it’s a hangover already! The unfamiliar is not comforting. Not comforting at all.

But here is what I think: it also gives you some unexpected opportunities if you recognize them and take advantage of them. I am thinking of people you wanted to talk to for a while, but haven't had time because of your busy work. Call them! I am calling a lot more people, a lot more parishioners in these days of "social distancing" (Tel me, will that be the most infamous word of 2020???), because that's the safest way to be a pastor to your people right now. Maybe that forced "fasting" from our national sports and the incredible importance of that score last night (little sarcasm...) is a good thing. I can't tell you how often I have checked European soccer scores in the course of a week. Yes, that is a confession! So, we have a new Lenten discipline in these days and weeks of being semi-quarantined. (Many of us work regular hours and many of us still "go to work," but life has undoubtedly changed.)

Is Jesus sitting somewhere in our vicinity, pointing us to a deeper meaning and a path forward in the midst of the unsettling and unfamiliar things we are caught up in? Is our Savior guiding us through these times when normal life seems to be on ice - into a deeper, more meaningful relationship with him and a more alert and mindful way of living? I believe so! "That well of life is here," he says, "right in front of you. Just draw from it!" Of course, we also have to let that happen!

Finally, I will tell you this: We are people of faith. We don't panic. But we are also not naïve or reckless. We will do whatever it takes to prevent further spread and be good neighbors in our communities. And we can pray to God wherever... (*"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."* John 4:24)

So, be blessed during this coming week and don't hesitate to reach out to me via email or phone. I check it regularly. May the Lord be your light and your salvation!

Amen.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, so much is uncertain and unfamiliar right now. Our world is changing in so many ways and some of those changes worry us greatly. As we face this newest

*challenge, the COVID 19 virus, we remember that you have led your people through plagues and droughts, through great danger and hardship. We have been so blessed in our lifetimes that most of us hardly remember such times. Draw us together in your spirit; bless and strengthen all medical workers; bless our government and their decision making. Let there be a sense of neighborly love and compassion among all people. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.***