

HIGH NOON



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[John 4:5-15](#)

Well this has been quite a week. A friend spoke to me on Friday, saying, “I know we met and talked on Tuesday—just three days ago—but it seems like that conversation was a month ago, so much has changed since then.” Weary from hearing all the news about the coronavirus, I picked up some light reading, a novel I had read in college: Daniel Defoe’s “A Journal of the Plague Year, London, 1665.”

You might not recognize the author, Daniel Defoe, but you are probably familiar with his most enduring character, Robinson Crusoe. Defoe writes as a journalist and today we would call his work historical fiction. His observations of conditions in the middle of the 17th century London sound like they could have been written yesterday. He describes how every day conversation in the fall of 1664 contained rumors and reports that the plague had returned to Holland. Neighbors told outlandish tales and shared stories that may have contained a grain of truth, but they all centered around death and disease. People speculated whether the plague had begun in Holland, or whether it came from the Middle East. Some thought it was carried aboard a ship from Turkey and others were convinced it all began in Italy. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

Gradually the topic of conversation shifted and nothing more was said about the plague for months... until two people died in London. Then no one could talk about anything else. Papers published daily death counts; shops were shuttered and closed; churches were empty on Sundays, but priests were overworked on Monday through Friday because of all the dead who needed to be buried. Most poignant is Defoe’s description of the streets of London. He writes:

“The face of London was strangely altered. The buildings themselves seemed different. Westminster was grayer. Bells chimed in a minor key. Sorrow and sadness was on every face. Though some people were not yet overwhelmed, all looked deeply concerned. Everyone looked on himself and his family as in the utmost danger. London might well be said to be all in tears.”

I read these things not out of morbid fascination but because they remind me: the world has been here before. Where we are now in the United States—living in the midst of a

modern plague that we have labeled a pandemic—well, others have already walked. And still the world is spinning in its orbit and people’s lives continue to be a mix of life and death, joy and sorrow, thriving and suffering. God may work in mysterious ways, but God does indeed continue to work through us and among us.

We may not have fully recognized it yet, but what we are going through as a nation is what Elisabeth Kubler-Ross once labeled the Stages of Grief. Some of us are angry. Our lives have been turned upside down by this virus. We had to cancel trips, we’ve lost income, been kept away from meaningful work, we lost our March basketball tournament, and had our kids sent home from school. We can’t work the way we have always worked, can’t study, can’t worship, can’t assemble even in small groups. Some states have set the limit at 4 people gathered in one place at one time.

Some of us are in denial, insisting that the whole world is over-reacting to this virus; saying that the Swine flu was worse, or polio was more dire, or that this virus will result in little more than a bad head cold. All of us are hoping beyond hope that after three or four weeks of this social isolation, the world will return to normal, the stock market will rise, and the kids will go back to school. That too, may turn out to be a form of denial.

A lot of us are striking bargains with the universe. We rush to the stores, hoping that one more case of toilet paper, one more case of drinking water, one more bottle of hand sanitizer will save us and our loved ones from all the bad that is coming our way. Others of us have fallen into depression, as if the whole of the city is in tears. Children wept when they were told that school was dismissed for the next three weeks. Yes, some college students are out partying, but seniors set to graduate from MSU, they will never get their graduation ceremony. Meanwhile, we tell our little jokes to one another about what it feels like to be put in a high risk group simply because we are more than 60 years old, but underneath our laughter, there is a catch in our voice. We say “yes,” but all the while our head is shaking side to side, communicating “no.”

It is high noon when Jesus sits down upon the well outside the city of Sychar in Samaria. The people of Judaea practiced centuries of social distancing when it came to Samaria and Samaritans. An observant Jew traveling from Jerusalem to Galilee would have taken the longer road around the region of Samaria so as not to encounter any of these half-breeds. But Jesus walks right through the heart of Samaritan territory, and his disciples reluctantly follow.

Wells are the center of community’s life. Early morning and at the end of the day is when people, mostly women, come to draw water for cooking, cleaning, bathing and drinking. Throughout the Middle East, local people bring their own buckets, while travelers carry a small leather bucket that can be rolled up for easy transport. Jesus has sent his disciples into the village for provisions, and it is likely that they have taken this small leather bucket with them. Now it is high noon, when every reasonable person has found somewhere to sit

in the shade. But Jesus is alone at the well, thirsty, with no bucket, no friends, and little prospect of finding help.

Whenever Jesus does important work, he does it from a position of weakness and vulnerability. He gets on his hands and knees to wash the feet of his disciples. He rides a donkey into Jerusalem. His hands are bound when he is turned over to Pilate and Herod; and the most important work that Jesus will accomplish is done while nailed to the cross, at high noon.

Then a woman arrives. She shouldn't be there either. She must have her own reasons for showing up at noon, and likely, she is trying to avoid other people. Jesus tells this stranger, this woman, that he is thirsty. Because of the translation into English, we may hear Jesus' words as a command. In truth, when Jesus tells this stranger to give him a drink, he is admitting that he is weak and in need of her help.

She believes herself unworthy and unable to draw water for any Jewish man. They should not even be talking to one another. And that is when Jesus reveals he has the power to become a source of living water. The Samaritan woman at the well hears his words and recognizes her own thirst—a thirst that cannot be quenched by the water alone. When she dares to express her hope for God to break into human history, to break the cycle of fear and violence and grief, Jesus reveals his true identity to her. We translate the phrase as, "I am he." But that is not what Jesus says. Jesus pronounces the holy name of God in Aramaic: "Yahweh," the name that means, "I am." Jesus claims his identity as God for the first time at this well, before an unnamed Samaritan woman. "Yahweh is the one speaking to you."

In this season of Lent, the whole world has been driven into a wilderness of fear and anxiety. Every day we hear and tell stories of want, of blame, of anger, depression, and denial. In the mad rush to save ourselves from the unknown, we may well lose sight of what it is that makes us human, and what it is that really gives life. We are being driven back to an elemental reality, and the question before us concerns the reliability of our God, and our capacity to trust God when our own resources have grown thin.

The Old Testament is full of stories of men and women who find one another at the village well. Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac at the well in Haran. At the same well, Jacob falls in love with Rachel. And now Jesus has come to this well seeking a different kind of bride. He has come to this well as the bridegroom searching for his bride, the Church.

Jesus comes to Samaria, sets aside years of mistrust, violence, and bitterness by asking a strange woman for something to drink. He has come as a servant because he was at the mercy of those he came to serve. This is the weakness of Jesus that we, his followers, must share. For to serve from a position of power is not service at all. The only way to build love between two people, or two groups of people, is to be so related to each other as to stand in

need of each other. The Christian community must serve, and it must be in a position where it needs to be served.

Our task this day, this week, and in the days and weeks ahead, is to remember our calling. Yes, we need to practice social distancing and isolation so the virus cannot spread. But at the same time, we need to remember who we are, and Whose we are. We can still practice care and compassion among one another. We can find new ways to remain connected and to care for the most vulnerable. We can practice charity and mercy, seek the truth, and proclaim good news that is far beyond the news of the day.

This morning, it is little Elizabeth Case Walder who stands in as the woman at the well. She reminds us that life shines through every darkness. She teaches us, by her vulnerability and trust, that we do not have to act out of fear. Rather, faith, hope, and love, these things abide; these gifts from God will help us get through the darkest hour.

Our God is a thirsty God. “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. For out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” You and I are called to be living signs that God has not abandoned us. We can trust in God’s promises, we can take the time—in a world that fears it has no time—to care for all who thirst for God’s kingdom. That kingdom will be present—even in the likes of you and me—even here and now. Amen.