

Trinity Lutheran Church - Third Sunday in Lent

March 15th, 2020

At Home Worship Service

Trinity recently announced that we are suspending in-person gatherings until at least March 29th. In response, we are seeking to provide a variety of ways to worship and stay connected. Below you will find a brief order of service for you to read at home. It includes a prayer, a Scripture reading, and my Sunday sermon. If you are in need of prayer or support, please call me on my cell phone at 608-424-5594. – Pastor Andy

Opening Prayer

Begin with a few deep breaths.

Loving God, you are our strength and our refuge. Quiet my heart and turn my attention towards you. Help me to listen for your voice in the words of Scripture. Connect me with my church family at Trinity Lutheran, and, even as we are separate physically, unite us in the one body of Christ. In the name of Jesus, I ask for your presence. Amen.

Gospel Reading: John 4:5-42

This is an extended Bible reading. If it helps, pause every once in awhile, close your eyes, and picture yourself in the story. I find this help to take it all in.

So [Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is

coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ!**

Sermon – “Jesus Meets Us in Unexpected Places” by Pastor Andy Twiton

Jesus meets us in unexpected places, in surprising people and encounters. In fact, the God we meet in Jesus seems unwilling to stay in the boxes we create. This God is constantly crossing the lines, boundaries, and borders we create.

I wonder: is possible you might meet Jesus in a new way during this time of crisis? Is it possible God will find a way to speak to us today in a new way even as we practice “social distancing”? Perhaps these questions awaken in you a longing for God to surprise you.

During this time, I think there’s a human inclination to respond to crisis in two different ways. Crisis either brings out the worst in us or the best in us. One way we can responding to crisis is by turning in on ourselves, hoarding God’s gifts, and only looking

out for “me and mine.” The other way to respond to crisis is to open up in new ways to God and to each other.

I think thankfully I’ve seen several examples of how people are looking out for each other. There’s been a sense that we’re in this together even as we are physically apart. It’s that sense that when we hear a virus is threatening our elders in nursing homes, we say “Of course, we can cancel a basketball game if it can do something to help!” Or when we hear a disease can harm those with compromised immune systems – those with cancer, diabetes, lung conditions – we say, “Of course, we can change the way we do church for a time to protect them!”

That’s why I’ve been so careful to say that we are not canceling church. Because the church is not a building. It’s not a place. The church is wherever you are sitting right now. You are the body of Christ. The church is the people.

We are not canceling church. We are being the church in a new way in this time.

And that’s why we remain open to this surprising God. Jesus meets us in unexpected places.

I want to talk about this surprising God first by sharing a bit of my own story and then by turning to this remarkable story of Jewish rabbi and a Samaritan woman who met at Jacob’s well.

In my own call story, I encountered Jesus in a surprising way in an unexpected relationship, and the course of my life was altered because of it. Just as a bit of background, I come from a family of pastors. My dad is a pastor. My grandpa was a pastor. So throughout my childhood, people would often ask me: “Are you going to be a pastor like your dad when you grow up?” But whenever they would say this, I wouldn’t really hear them. I assumed they were affirming my dad’s gifts more than my own. I felt as though they were projecting his gifts onto me, that it wasn’t really me they were seeing.

The question kept coming up though throughout high school, college, and camp. But I always said, “No, I’ll never become a pastor.”

But after college, I went into the Lutheran Volunteers Corps. I spent a year living in Berkeley, CA and working in Oakland. I worked at Thunder Road Adolescent Treatment Center which is a group home for teenagers facing drug and alcohol addiction. While at Thunder Road, I shared an office with a woman named Ani. Ani was an Iranian-American. Her family was a Muslim family from Iran.

She didn’t know much about Lutheranism, and she didn’t know my family. And yet she would often tell me that I reminded her of chaplain. She had a favorite TV show, and she

said that I reminded her of the clergy in that show. So I didn't see it coming but through her voice I began to sense that perhaps God was calling me into ministry. And it was during that year I seriously began to consider this calling. A surprising person spoke to me and helped me hear the voice of God.

Jesus meets us in unexpected places, in unexpected people and encounters. And I've experienced that in my own life.

This is what happens in today's Gospel story too.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced many of us to a new concept – “social distancing.” It's the idea that viruses spread through close, social contact. Therefore, if we increase the distance between people we can prevent and slow down the spreading of the disease from person to person. This is why we're doing things like canceling March Madness, standing six feet apart, and suspending in-person worship. We're trying to slow down the rate of the outbreak so that it doesn't overwhelm our health care system.

It's an important concept, and it's part of the reason we are taking these cautious actions. And yet I wish there was a better name for it. As some people have suggested, we need to physically distance ourselves, but we must stay connected socially. We must not let physical distancing for the sake of health become isolation or exclusion or fear of strangers. We must look out for each other – even if we are not in close, physical proximity for a time.

In our Gospel Reading, we see a form of “social distancing” that has turned into isolation. Our text notes that the Samaritan woman comes to the well at “about noon” (see John 4:5). This would have been an off time, a lonely time to visit the well. Commentators note that most people would go to the well for water either early in the morning or later in the afternoon to avoid the heat of the day. (It reminds me of the advice to go to the grocery store at “off times” to avoid the rush for toilet paper and hand sanitizer. We've seen a lot of this recently.) When we read the woman went to retrieve water at noon, the text is begging us to ask why.

We learn in her story that she is experiencing social exclusion and has been through a series of broken relationships. She has had five husbands and now is living with a man who is not her husband. Generations of commentators have heaped negative assumptions onto this woman, but the text itself doesn't say she was a promiscuous woman by choice or anything like that. Instead, I think we should read this story as one about a strong woman who has been caught in a tragic and unjust system of social exclusion and shame.

So she comes to the well, and Jesus is there. And Jesus sees and hears her in a way she did not expect. They have a long and theological discussion. She leaves saying, “He told me everything I have ever done.”

The text wants us to know that there is nothing normal about this encounter. This is an out-of-the-ordinary, weird, surprising encounter.

First of all, Jesus is a Jew and the woman is a Samaritan. The narrator inserts a comment to make sure we know that Jews and Samaritans do not associate with each other. The woman herself is surprised when Jesus addresses her. “How is that you a Jew is asking a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?”

Second of all, in this culture, it is unexpected that an unmarried man and woman would be talking to each other like this. The text says the disciples are “astonished” when they see Jesus speaking with her. Furthermore, in this culture and in the stories of the Bible, the well is a kind of romantic place. It was at a well that Jacob met Rachel and Isaac met Rebekah. So when the disciples find Jesus speaking to this woman they are astonished. He is talking to her! And worse it is at a well! The text says they are “astonished” but a better word might be “scandalized.”

The final surprise is for us the audience. After Jesus has this encounter with her, after he sees and hears her story in a deep way, this unnamed woman turns and becomes the first evangelist, the first preacher for Jesus’ movement in John’s Gospel. Our text says: “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39). We may not know her name, but she’s a preacher!

Nothing in this story is usual. Jesus meets us in unexpected places, in surprising encounters and people. This is why I’m encouraging us to keep our hearts open in this time – open to God, open to each other, open to people who are different from us. Even as we physically distance ourselves, we must find new ways to stay connected.

Rabbi Yosef Kanesfky from Los Angeles spoke to his congregation about the COVID-19 disease and said this: “Every hand that we don’t shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.”

May you feel seen and heard by Jesus today, because he meets us in unexpected places. Let’s keep our hearts open and our church connected. Amen.

Closing Blessing

The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord’s face shine on us with grace and mercy.
The Lord look upon us with favor and give us peace.
Amen.