Sermon: John 4:4-42

3rd Sunday in Lent

American Lutheran Church

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Grace and peace to you this day from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus and his disciples have been in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover, teaching and baptizing, but at the beginning of John chapter 4, Jesus decides it is time to leave Jerusalem behind and head back “home” to Galilee, a region north of Jerusalem, where Jesus grew up. In order to get to Galilee from Jerusalem, the Gospel of John says, Jesus “HAD TO” go through Samaria. Except here’s the thing. Jesus didn’t “Have to” go to Samaria. Everyone knows that there is almost always an alternative route. Just ask Google maps how to go someplace and it will often give you an alternative route! For example, when I ask Google maps how to go to my parent’s farm in Minnesota it immediately gives me two possible routes to I-29N. I can US-77 N through Fremont to Sioux City where it connects with I-29N or I can take I-80E to 680N in Omaha to I-29N. I-29 is the fastest and most direct route to Fargo-Moorhead, but sometimes I-29 closes down in blizzards…then if you’re really in the mood to drive slowly in miserable conditions you can take US 75N to Moorhead. It will get you there but the going will be slow. The same is true for Jesus. He did not have to go to Samaria to get to Galilee. In fact, most Jewish people would not have gone through Samaria to get to Galilee. They would have taken the Transjordan route that traveled to the east of the Jordan river. By doing this they would have quarantined themselves from the unclean Samaritans all together. The route that Jesus chose is the shortest route geographically, but it was usually avoided because it passed through Samaritan territory, and as our text reminds us later, Jews and Samaritans do not hold things in common.

You see, Samaritans were people whose ancestry was ½ Israelite and ½ Assyrian colonists. When the northern kingdom of Israel fell in 722 BC some of the Israelites were deported into Babylon. When Asyria defeated Babylon, some of the Israelites were sent back along with colonist who were loyal to Assyria. The colonists would make it easier for Assyria to rule over Israel. The colonists and the Israelites intermarried and formed the region of Samaria. They for the most part worshipped the God of Israel, but they didn’t believe that they had to worship God is the temple in Jerusalem. They built a temple closer to them on Mount Gerizim to worship God and they did not support the process of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. This did not sit well with the Jewish community. Later one of the temple priests in Jerusalem went and burnt down the temple on Mount Gerizim. There have been countless other squabbles between these two groups and too this very day the two groups don’t get along with each other. So when the Gospel today say that Jews and Samaritans held nothing in common, it means exactly that! If a Jewish person came in physical contact with a Samaritan, they were declared ritually unclean and would have to go through proper rituals to be allowed back into their worshipping community. That’s why most Jews traveling from Jerusalem to Galilee took the slightly longer alternative route and avoided Samaria all together. So why does Jesus “have to” go to Samaria? Does he have to go to Samaria because he’s in a hurry and he has to take the shortest route, or does he have to go to Samaria, because that is where his heavenly Father has told him to go?

I imagine God sent him to go to meet and talk to the woman who with a heavy heart comes to the well alone and at noon to gather water. Even in Jesus’ time women traveled in packs. We travel in packs to visit, and keep safe as well as many other reasons. This woman travels in the heat of the day alone. For one reason or another she has been excluded from the pack of women who would have gone together to fetch water early in the morning before the sun was so hot. Was she practicing social distancing for some reason or had she been figuratively quarantined by the community for one reason or another? The bottom line is, there is something off, in the picture that is being created here, and Jesus knows this well.

“Give me a drink of water,” he says. Immediately the woman’s hackles are raised. Why is he speaking to her? What does he want? Is he a predator—men could do terrible things to women in Jesus’ time too? Is he simply asking for water? What’s the matter with him—get it yourself!! In fact, seriously, what is the matter with him? Jews and Samaritans hold nothing in common. Simply touching bucket that she has touched would have made Jesus unclean, let alone drinking something that she offered to him. Is it any wonder the woman asks so many questions over a simple request?

Finally, Jesus begins to bring us all to the point of this story. “If you knew who I am Jesus says, you would have asked me to give you a cup of water, and I would have given you living water and you that water would spring up in you forever and you would never, ever be thirsty again.” The woman is intrigued. If Jesus only knew how much she hated coming to the well in the heat of the day, every day, all by herself. If Jesus only knew how thirsty her heart was, not just for cool morning water, but also for the love and companionship of community. If Jesus only knew how thirsty she was for acceptance, not just by others but also by God. But she doesn’t know Jesus, and for all she knows he is just another man who is trying to take advantage of her. He’d give her water? He doesn’t even have a bucket. Still, she’ll bite, “Give me some of this water then.” She says. “First, go get your husband,” Jesus says. “I have no husband.” “That’s right,” says Jesus, “you have had 5 husbands, and the one that you have now is not your husband.” Isn’t it amazing. Jesus and the woman have spoken only about eight short sentences to each other, and suddenly they have arrived at the heart of the pain.

Jesus had to go through Samaria because God had sent him to talk to the outcast of outcasts and to pour living water into the painful wounds of her heart…to offer her God’s unconditional love, forgiveness and grace. Jesus would offer her the living water of Baptism where she would receive the Holy Spirit, and acceptance into the family of God and eventually into the community of God’s people. Jesus was sent to outcast of the outcasts, and in speaking with her, he begins to show her that God’s love was for her...and for her whole community too. The mountain that she and Jesus are speaking on as they stand at the well is mount Gerizim—the mountain that once held the Samaritan temple of worship that the Jewish priest burnt down. Now he and woman talk about this conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans. It is not the place of worship that matters Jesus says, it’s who we worship that matters. Wherever we are, whoever we are, Jesus says, “we are invited to worship God the Father in Spirit and in truth!” In fact, this is the good news, God sent his Son to find us all, wherever we are at!

It has been an interesting week hasn’t it? One minute we were listening to troubling news on television and the next minute the troubling news is here in our community. One minute other states were sick and dying with a virus that can spread before we even know we’re sick, and the next minute there are people one county over who are sick with the same virus. One minute, life was occurring as normal, and the next minute organizations begin to cancel things right and left. The cancelations already reach into the summer months. This week many pebbles have been dropped in the ocean of change, and we have yet to learn what all the ripple effects will be, so today we come as the woman did when she walked to the well. We come carrying a bucket full emotions and struggles some of which are very difficult to put a finger on and name. Perhaps we come carrying feelings of frustration over the inconvenience and disappointment of things canceled and changed. We come perhaps fearful of the virus and all of its unknowns. We come perhaps concerned about other hurting communities and worried about what will happen if and when we know someone who is sick with this virus? We come perhaps afraid of how empty some of the store aisles have become…and we come carrying the personal baggage we were carrying before as well. It is a chore to carry water in the heat of the day, and it is hard work for the spirit to carry the struggles of the past week as well.

Today in our Gospel Jesus went to Samaria not because he “had” to physically, but because God sent him to the hurting. To a woman who was shut-out by her community and perhaps felt shut-out by God. Jesus went because before their conversation even began he knew her and he knew her pain. Jesus went because before their conversation even began he knew her whole community was thirsty for the reassuring grace and love of God. He went to fill their parched and broken spirits with the gushing life giving Spirit filled waters of life. Christ went to speak the truth and name the fear and brokenness…and he went to share the good news that God sent his very Son to be with us in the brokenness and to promise us that this brokenness is not the end of the story…the life-giving water gushes, and waters our lives, our spirits, our communities, forever. New things are bound to grow out of this because that is what happens when seeds are watered with the life restoring waters of spring. Christ comes gushing with the Good News, nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He comes with the good news that God sent his Son to come to us…so we need not get to Jerusalem, or Mount Gerizem, or even American Lutheran to dwell in the love of the Lord, we can pray, worship, and dwell in the Word of the Lord no matter where the next few days find us! The Good News is that God sent his Son not just to the Jews, not just to the Samaritans, not just to the Lutherans, but to all people whose hearts are thirsty! So my friends, this is your mission this week—and always, we come like the woman, and Jesus fills us, then we are sent like the woman to gush God’s love to those around us. Look around you and notice the thirsty places and people of this world then share the life giving water of Christ that you’ve been given. Nursing Homes can’t have visitors…but maybe they can have phone calls. Shut-ins should not have visitors, but how about phone calls and mail. Children are out of school for an extra week and some business are closed…does that mean that there will be extra hunger in our community? How can we share? Store shelves are emptier than usual. There are some whose lives may actually depend on keeping their homes and health equipment clean, and everyone needs to eat. So, nervous as the empty shelves might make us, maybe we can trust that God does provide, and only buy what we actually need so that there is enough for others who may actually need it as well. We pray—for those who are hurting and sick, we pray for those who provide care, we pray for our daily needs and we ask God to show us ways we can be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. Even in scary times we gush with this good news. The Good News is that God sent his only Son us and this hurting world and that only the love of God endures forever, so we think about the needs of others and care for the safety of our neighbors, and we find ways to gush with God’s love even, and especially in the midst of all that has and may continue to change. Amen.