

Lent 3 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

March 15, 2020

John 4:5-42

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

You and I think of Lent as a time to eat less chocolate. But its origins had almost nothing to do with repentance and self-sacrifice. In the early church, all of the baptisms took place on one day of the year. Easter. At what we call the Easter Vigil which you may have experienced in another Lutheran or Roman Catholic parish. Anyone who wanted to become a Christian would be baptized into the Christian family in a very dramatic midnight service on Easter Sunday.

New proselytes were expected to spend 40 days in preparation for their baptism. These were almost all adults and youths, not infants. They spent 40 days being mentored. They prayed, they fasted, they went on what we now call retreats. They studied, they were taught the Bible and doctrine. So that was the first stage of Lent. It was for those preparing for baptism, and had little meaning for those who were already Christians. Then came some other changes.

Those people who were preparing for baptism studied three gospel stories during this 40-day period. Three long stories from the gospel according to John. These stories were intended for spiritual self-examination. You were supposed to meditate upon them. You were supposed to ask yourself questions about yourself. Where are you in the story? How do you see yourself? What spiritual truths do you see in these stories, and how do they apply to you? This was all part of your preparation for baptism. You were supposed to examine yourself. And be examined by others, such as a mentor or the priest who was going to baptize you.

And so these three stories came to be called “the scrutinies.” You’ve heard the verb *scrutinize*. It means to examine closely. And so these three passages from the gospel according to John were called the scrutinies because they were used to help you examine yourself closely in a spiritual manner prior to that dramatic, sumptuous ritual of baptism that you were getting ready for at Easter.

The three scrutinies are the Samaritan woman that Jesus meets at the well. John chapter four. The man who was born blind, and who was given his sight by Jesus. John chapter nine. And the raising of Lazarus from the dead. John chapter eleven. These are all long, and deep, and full of intricate details. I switched with John Hoelter, and I read the readings from Exodus and Romans so that you could get a fresh voice on this long, complex reading. And we were supposed to have Sue Yoquelet do the same at the later worship service. She would have done a great job. Because we really want to bring these stories alive, and make them intriguing for you. So that

you might find yourself scrutinized. The 20th century theologian Karl Barth famously said, “We do not interpret the Bible. “The Bible interprets us.” These great stories, the three great scrutinies, have that kind of power. They scrutinize us.

There are several big themes in this story. As with the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke’s gospel, we are dealing with an outsider who does the right things. Samaritans were wrong people, bad people, according to the members of Jesus’ society. So this woman is a Samaritan, and not only is she a Samaritan, but she has had a number of husbands, and is currently living with a man who is not her husband. So she’s not a reputable person. This is why the question is raised of whether Jesus should even allow his lips to touch any cup of water that she might hand to him. “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans,” the writer tells us. And yet this outsider comes to see Jesus as the Messiah. And she becomes one of those that the New Testament would call an apostle, or what we might call an evangelist: a proclaimer of the good news. A woman. A Samaritan.

So that’s one part of the story. This story falls directly after Nicodemus, and is in contrast to it. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. This woman is a Samaritan. Nicodemus is male. She is female. Nicodemus is in Jerusalem. She meets Jesus in Samaria. Nicodemus comes at night. This woman meets Jesus at midday. Nicodemus seems to not be able to understand. She, in contrast, understands.

Another part of the story and what it might mean for us has to do with the image of water. Elsewhere in this gospel, the writer tells us that “living water” means the Holy Spirit. So the water that Jesus is talking about in this story could be the Holy Spirit. Or it could be eternal life. Or it could be baptism. Or in this gospel of John, it could likely be all of the above. For those of us like me and most Lutherans, who think that we have everything figured out and placed into distinct theological categories (“*This* is one person of the Trinity, and this is another person of the Trinity.” Or, “this is sacrament A, and that is sacrament B.” Or, “this is flesh and *that* is Spirit.”) Jesus words in this story are, in contrast, poetry rather than theology.

But there is still another level of this story. Jesus and this woman meet at a well. But not just any well. The woman mentions Jacob. Jacob from the first book of the Bible, Genesis. And Jacob met Rachel at a well. Perhaps this same well. It is one of the great love stories of the Bible. Genesis and Jacob and Rachel linger in the background of this story. We sometimes talk about finding Mister Right. Or Ms. Right. Or meeting our soulmate. And that meeting of your great love, your true love, hovers in the background of this gospel reading.

So if we read this story as one of the scrutinies, if you and I were early Christians preparing to be baptized at Easter, here we would begin to think about being unfulfilled. In what way are you thirsty? In what way are you looking for a soulmate? What is the yearning part of your own soul? The Samaritan woman has had five husbands, and the man she is living with is not her husband. Whatever the reason is for this, she has definitely been unlucky in love. But now at the well, she finds what she has been looking for. Jesus is not a husband in the normal sense,

nor is he a lover in the erotic sense. But he is the answer to her longing and her restlessness. He is, in the image of the day, living water for a thirsty soul.

Some of us know what it is like to seek a human soulmate and to be disappointed. Some of us seek purpose and life and fulfillment in our work. Or by becoming parents. Or by study. Or by joining the Marines. Some people do find fulfillment and life in these pursuits. But this story is for those who have not. This story asks us in what ways are we unfulfilled. In what ways are we thirsty. In what ways do our hearts yearn. And to consider that Christ might be the answer. There's well water that you can put in a jug. But Jesus is living water, in contrast to H₂O from a well.

In our congregation, we frequently hear the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, or play it, or sing it. In his great cantatas, the human soul is usually portrayed by a soprano. And Jesus is usually portrayed by a bass. And the music is often romantic in the sense that the soprano is found by the bass, and he becomes her true love. I don't speak German, but I can read the translations, and you can sometimes feel the opera-ish romance in Bach's church music even if you don't speak a word of German. This gospel story today is almost a template for Bach's music.

We're not doing Bach today. But our hymn of the day has the distinction of being written by the great Christian leader and thinker Bernard of Clairvaux. O Jesus, Joy of Loving Hearts. It speaks of Jesus as the fountain of life. And even in the very first verse, it says that from every bliss that earth imparts we turn unfilled to hear his call. Earth offers us forms of happiness. But those things cannot fill us the way that Christ can.

Lent is a moment when we can examine ourselves— Scrutiny! — and find those empty places in our lives where we still thirst. Jesus says today: "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." May you find, may I find, may the world find the answer to our deepest longings in the one whom this nameless woman met at Jacob's well. Amen.