

WATER IN THE WILDERNESS

JOHN 4:1-42

Third Sunday of Lent | March 15, 2020

Community CRC, Kitchener ON

Sisters and brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ, we began this season of Lent with the story of the temptation of our Lord in the wilderness, with the powerful reminder that there are times in our lives when the Holy Spirit leads us into the wilderness.

The Greek word for wilderness in that story is *eremos*, which is variously translated in the New Testament as wilderness, or desert. But the word itself actually means lonely, solitary, or alone. To follow the Spirit's leading into the *eremos*, into the wilderness, is to follow God in solitude, to follow God in the times when we are alone.

Times of solitude are important for our spiritual development. There are many stories throughout the scriptures that reinforce this truth. Our Lord goes alone into the wilderness, led by the Spirit, to confront the temptations of the devil. God appears to Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Elijah, and many others, when they are alone. Jesus often, over the course of his ministry seeks out solitude for prayer. Solitude offers us intentional time of reflection, rest, and prayer.

But even as our Lord calls us to the *eremos*, to the place of solitude, to the desert place, we remember the words of the Creator: "It is not good for man to be alone." Times of solitude are important, but we are created as social beings, created for community, created to live our lives most fully in relationship with God and one another.

Which means that being alone is vastly different than being lonely. In these trying times of global pandemic, when we are encouraged to implement strict practices of social distance, it is important for us to remember that there are many in our society, even in our neighbourhoods, who suffer social isolation, who suffer loneliness.

Many experts testify that loneliness has become something of a pandemic in modern societies. But we don't need to turn to experts to know this, because we feel it ourselves. Our increasingly mobile, digital, and globalized world leaves us rootless and devoid of meaningful human connection. Our slavish submission to the economy fills our lives with so much busyness that we have no time for rituals of rest and fellowship, and the unyielding demands of the schedule fracture our lives. Lack of meaningful community makes us

anxious, lonely, fearful, and prone to ideology. We become enamoured with personalities on YouTube and Instagram, drawing our values and principles from ideological celebrities, and as a result we feel increasingly distant from those around us as what we have in common becomes more and more superficial. In the middle of conversations we check our phones to see if anyone else might be trying to get ahold of us. We feel lonely, even when we are surrounded by people who love us.

If human beings are created for community, there is perhaps no affliction more detrimental to overall wellbeing than loneliness, which destroys people completely—heart and soul, mind and body.

In our scripture passage today, Jesus has a chance encounter with a woman at the well of Jacob. We are not given her name, but from the text there is much we can learn about her. This woman is a Samaritan, a people group who lived in the heart of ancient Palestine, sandwiched between Judea to the south and Galilee to the north. The Jews of Judea and Galilee had no great love for the Samaritans, who they viewed as a mongrel race, the result of intermarriage between Israelites and the surrounding nations—the Canaanites, the Moabites, the Edomites, and the Arameans. The Jews of Judea and Galilee viewed the Samaritans as practicing an idolatrous and blasphemous corruption of true religion—worshipping at high places far from the temple in Jerusalem and reading corrupted versions of the Torah. Because of economic and social isolation, the Samaritans were seen as lazy, offensive, and foreign. They were wholly other. Good Jews avoided Samaritans at all costs, even going as far as to take an extra week to travel from Judea to Galilee, just to avoid Samaria.

Jesus talking with a Samaritan would have been taboo in and of itself, but Jesus breaks another taboo here as well, because in Jesus' society it was considered improper for a man to speak with a woman he did not know in public. And this is not just any woman. In ancient society, and many societies today where people do not have access to running water, it is common for women to gather water at dawn and dusk, not in the heat of the day. The fact that this woman is coming to the well at noon, alone, tells us that she was a shunned woman, a pariah, effectively excommunicated from her community. Over the course of their conversation, we learn that she has been married five times, and the man with whom she currently lives is not her husband. Jesus is breaking several societal rules here.

And traditionally, when this passage is preached, the pastor would go from here to talk about how the grace of this passage is that despite this woman's wickedness, her sexual impropriety and marital infidelity, despite her sin, Jesus shows her grace and her life is transformed. Jesus can save even a sinner like her—an unfaithful serial divorcee.

But that reading does a grave injustice to this woman, and to this text, which nowhere speaks of this woman as a sinner or of her life situation as a result of her sin. This story never associates divorce with this poor woman, and even if it is implied, in ancient Jewish society, a woman could not divorce her husband. Only men had the power to demand a divorce.

So what we have here in this story is not an unfaithful, promiscuous woman. The apostle rather introduces her as a woman who has experienced immense suffering in her life. She has been married to five men, all of whom either died or abandoned her, passed from one family to another. And after that many unsuccessful marriages, her community probably came to see her as cursed, and her current living situation is probably not a case of cohabitation. She has probably been forced by her desperate situation to become a concubine, a woman who is neither wife nor prostitute, but something in between. Used for her body, without any standing in society.

This woman is a pariah, not because of her sin, but because of her suffering. Her community has responded to her suffering not with love and care and support, but with rejection, with shame, with social isolation. She is alone. And she is lonely.

But Jesus' response to her is not one of rejection, condemnation, or judgment. Jesus offers her living water in the wilderness of Samaria, the promise of the Holy Spirit in the midst of her loneliness and social isolation. In the face of rejection by community because she is considered cursed, Jesus offers her communion with the Creator God, so she may be blessed with eternal life. And this blessing is not only for her, but it becomes in her a "spring of water welling up to eternal life," and she becomes an evangelist, preaching the gospel of the good news to the community that had rejected her, to the very people that had scorned her, offering them the gift of God's love in Christ Jesus.

It shouldn't escape us that this story comes right after Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, and the contrast could not be more striking. In Nicodemus we have a religious leader, a theologically trained Pharisee, a wealthy man, a pious Jew—he comes to Jesus in

secret, under the cover of night, asking abruptly literal questions; and he leaves doubting. But in this story we have a poor Samaritan woman, spurned by her community—who comes to Jesus in public, in broad daylight, asking insightful and piercing questions; and she leaves proclaiming the gospel to those who caused her suffering.

People of God, modern society can often be an *eremos*, a lonely place, a wilderness. And in our *eremos* of busyness, fractured relationships, and demanding lives, it is important for us to remember that our God offers this living water to us as well. To us—even in our loneliness, our shame, our suffering—Jesus offers the Holy Spirit, Jesus offers personal relationship with the Creator God, Jesus offers the hope of the promise of eternal life. Our Lord meets us where we are, and enters into communion with us, to transform us to be vessels of his grace and love in this world.

And this is vital for us to remember in these trying times, when so many are driven by their sinful impulses to alarmist panic, xenophobic tribalism, and selfish greed. We worship the God who makes streams of living water spring forth in the desert, who causes water to flow from the rock, who causes life to flourish, even in the lonely places, in the wilderness, in the *eremos*. And this gift of living water, this gift of the Holy Spirit, is not for us alone. The Holy Spirit becomes in us “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” that pours out to those around us, to declare to the world, in our words and our deeds, the everlasting love of our covenant God.

So as we respond to this pandemic, let us be responsible in protecting the vulnerable in our communities from unnecessary risk. But let us also be attentive, so that we do not allow social distance to become social isolation. Maybe this can be an opportunity for us to slow down, take a break from the busyness of life, and learn to love one another as God intends. Let us take this time to care for our neighbours with the love of God, as image-bearers who reflect his divine nature, meeting them in their suffering with love and grace. May God grant us the grace to be living water in the wilderness, so that all the world may know the goodness of our God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**