

Self-Quarantine and Social Distance

John 4:5-42

Lent 3

John 4:5-42

⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

⁹The 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.)

¹⁰Jesus 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." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but 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."

¹⁵The 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."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But 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.

²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”

²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷Just 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?”

²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³²But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”

³⁴Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.”

³⁵“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. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”

⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word.

⁴²They 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.”

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The Sermon

Talk about social distancing.

No one in their right mind would *voluntarily* come to draw water in the middle of the day, under that scorching Middle Eastern sun.

Almost certainly that's why no one else is around at the moment.

And, presumably, it's why she is.

Under the best circumstances, the bucket is always the inescapable taskmaster:

 always demanding service,
 always requiring labor,
 never allowing a day off or giving so much as a pat on the back.

You never stop needing water.

The water jar represents the unavoidable labor of the day:

 the long slog to and from the well;
 the work; the weight; the tedium,
 and the task itself is only a tiny fraction
 of the daily work to be done.

That's true under the best of conditions and even normal conditions—when, like most people, you go to draw water at the logical time: in the morning dew at the grey light of dawn, or at the cooling retreat and the deepening blue sky of the evening. It's already enough of a chore at those times.

Going to the well under the midday sun multiplies that burden by a factor that only depends on how scorching it is on that day.

The only time you would go there at the middle of the day is if you're in a state of emergency; or if, say, you felt like the best thing you could do—for yourself and, maybe, for others—was to self-quarantine.

Why does she find it necessary to come to draw water when no one else is going to be around? Why surpass ordinary social distancing and go straight to self-quarantine?

Based on the reputation we are led to believe someone with her history may have had, maybe she's just had enough.

Maybe she's had enough of the looks and the whispers and the condescension from people who don't even know you, don't know a thing about you, but boy are they ready to pass judgment.

Maybe they don't talk directly to her. But she knows the looks; the quiet, ridiculing laughs; the imposed isolation.

“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” says Psalm 24, “and who shall stand in God's holy place?”

“Those who have clean hands and pure hearts.”

Nobody else can judge the purity of her heart. But they clearly don't trust those hands.

Maybe it feels like she can't wash them enough—like she can't sing the Happy Birthday song enough times while she's scrubbing—to convince the people around her that it's OK for them to come a little closer, that they don't have to back away in fear every time she comes near.

Get enough of that feeling, and pretty soon you learn that social distancing is just easier if you impose your own quarantine on yourself.

So, she waits until the hour when she knows it will just be her, when no one will be around to judge, or give her any more grief than she's already had—

no one to remind her how different she feels, how unacceptable she thinks she is to the rest of the world—especially the suddenly hazardous world around her.

This is such an unusual moment. I saw an article the other day, when all the college sports tournaments were being cancelled. An anonymous college basketball coach was quoted as saying something that speaks for all of us when he said,

“This is such new territory. You don't know how to act. There is no handbook on this. It's not like we can go back and reference what we did in the past.”ⁱ

There may be a few references, but he is definitely right about this being new territory, and about the need to relearn how to act—I mean, a nation full of people of extremely high achievement is being taught how to wash our hands, which we kind of thought we had mastered around age 3.

And there is no handbook. I've had more meetings with people in the last week than in the rest of the last year combined, and we're all in that zone of just trying to figure out how we can be most faithful to God and each other—what's the best thing to do, and what are the hundred ramifications of each decision, and how do we offset the most painful parts of it?

One of my clergy colleagues told me on Wednesday that for the passing of the peace last Sunday at their church, maintaining the requisite social distance of six feet from each other, they made the peace sign, and if they wanted to show enthusiasm, they'd do jazz hands.

And so, in the heat of the blazing sun, she comes to the ancestral well to draw her water, and Jesus is there, and the first thing he says to her is: "Give me a drink of water."

That used to strike me as kind of rude. How about, "May I please have a drink of water?" or "May I prevail upon you, if you could be so very kind, to draw a bit of water, and if you would, to share it with me?"

But I have realized that that's not always the way we talk when we are presenting ourselves as vulnerable friends.

We say, "Share your wisdom with me."

"Help me understand."

"Pray for me."

I see that you are one whom I am not supposed to speak with and you are from a people with whom my people do not share things and that you have a personal history that makes you dubious company.

I see that in at least one sense, the world does not believe that you have clean hands, let alone a pure heart.

And I'm asking you, in your state of quarantine, with those hands, to let me share the same water that you will drink from your own water jar.

And I want to offer you the water of life that only God can give.

Let me need you as much as you need me today, and let us together bring this holy water abundantly into the world.

A prayer by Macrina Wiederkehr:

Jesus, I come to the warmth of your Presence
knowing that You are
the very emptiness of God.
I come before You
holding the water jar of my life.
Your eyes meet mine
and I know what I'd rather not know.

I came to be filled
but I am already full.
I am too full.
This is my sickness
I am full of things
that crowd out
Your healing Presence.

A holy knowing steals inside my heart
and I see the painful truth.
I don't need more
I need less
I am too full.

I am full of things that block out
Your golden grace.
I am smothered by gods of my own creation
I am lost in the forest of my false self

I am full of my own opinions and narrow attitudes
full of fear, resentment, control
full of self pity, and arrogance.
Slowly this terrible truth pierces my heart,
I am so full, there is no room for You.

Contemplatively, and with compassion,
You ask me to reach into my water jar.
One by one, Jesus, you enable me
to lift out the things
that are a hindrance to my wholeness.
I take each on to my heart,
I hear You asking me
“Why is this so important to you?”

Like the murmur of a gentle stream
I hear You calling,
“Let go, let go, let go!”
I pray with each obstacle
tasting the bitterness and grief
it has caused.

Finally
I sit with my empty water jar
I hear you whisper
You have become a space for God
Now there is hope
Now you are ready to be a channel of Life.
You have given up your own agenda
There is nothing left but God.ⁱⁱ

He is our loving savior in ordinary time, and he offers living water in strange and disorienting times—times when we're afraid or anxious or discombobulated, and have been overloaded on this one story for too long.

Something is going on here: something that our mundane world of going to the well to draw daily water only begins to suggest,

something deep and infinite and powerful, something which is only available through an introspective and profoundly meaningful relationship with our Creator.

Jesus comes to all of us who are in our own ways isolated, socially distant, quarantined,

and he offers us living water, and accepts a drink from our tainted, faithful, trusting hands.

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ⁱ <https://247sports.com/college/indiana/Article/coronavirus-COVID-19-spring-recruiting-college-basketball-recruiting-impact-college-coaches-144997650/>

ⁱⁱ Macrina Wiederkehr, "The Prayer of the Empty Water Jar," in Wiederkehr, *Seasons of Your Heart* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 32-33.