

# *St James United Church*

Message for March 12, 2023

The Third Sunday in Lent

“Living Water”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:4-29



Here we are, on this third Sunday of Lent, once again eavesdropping on a “come and see” visit between Jesus and a possible disciple. This one feels different though, and not just because it’s noon and Jesus is speaking with a woman, a Samaritan woman at that. The two debate, just like last week with Nicodemus, but here Jesus is more invitational. It seems to hinge on his offer to her of living water. But what is living water and more to the point what is its purpose?

Well, the story offers a clue. As the author reminds us, it’s odd for Jesus to talk to a Samaritan. The Judeans and Samaritans were historical enemies. Add to this how men and women in both cultures didn’t talk in public, especially if they weren’t related. They really shouldn’t have been talking at all, but there they were in broad daylight, and at a well, a detail which means little to us, but in both the Samaritan and Jewish bibles, stories of a man and a woman at a well were preludes to marriage. It’s in this context that Jesus offers her living water, Jesus inviting her into a spiritual relationship. In the same conversation he makes the first of his “I am” statements in John, each echoing the answer God gave when Moses asked for God’s name – I am who I am. His declaration speaks of the relationship he shares in God, and into which he invites her, and us. It’s an inner relationship of grace, a mystical union we don’t merit but which God wants to share just the same. God is living water, source of new life available when we prayerfully turn within. Like with Moses in our Exodus reading, God is ever before us, responding to our fundamental thirst for relationship, a reality which we affirm in baptism and nurture throughout our lives, especially in church seasons like Lent.

This relationship is not only about individuals but the community. We proclaim this in our use of water for baptism, water a symbol of many things including one known well in this province with our historic use of the ocean as our highway. Water connects us, and often in transformative ways. This was brought home to me in a baptism preparation course I was leading. As I shared earlier in the service, in these sessions I often ask participants to choose between images of God as a way to explore their theology. Well once when I asked if God was more like a waterfall or the ocean, a young man said ocean. I expected him to say something about power or mystery, but instead he said God is like the ocean because it touches every continent, linking different places and peoples together. God is like that, he said. We’re often divided but God heals that and brings us together. In our gospel Jesus’ “I am” was about being

the Messiah, a plain declaration made only to her. In doing this, Jesus promised a new start for Samaritans and Judeans, as both groups believed that when Messiah came their relationship would be healed. He thus invites her whole community into divine marriage, and in turn all of us, a gift that can help renew all of our relationships.

To get there though we need a couple of other gifts that water symbolically offers us. One is cleansing. We've honoured this aspect from the beginning as church, baptism being a way adults spiritually let go of the past so as to live in a new way. But this letting go is not a one time experience. We often carry things we've done or done to us, and these memories can hold us back, can limit our relationships from being as supportive and nurturing as they could be. I once attended a seminar that took this to heart. It brought together church leaders and residential school survivors. At the end, church leaders were to listen to survivors one on one, without comment but just hear what was said with open hearts. The facilitator knew though that we'd only be able to do this if we'd let go of some of our own hurts. He asked us to reach out, if we could, to someone who'd hurt us, not to be friends again, but to make space in our hearts to be more emotionally present to people. I knew who to call but I was worried, so as suggested, I prayed before calling. I told him how what he'd done hurt me, how it still did. I was surprised when he admitted to what he'd done, more so when he told me he was sorry. But I was most surprised by how much his apology helped unburden me.

And so I experienced another gift that living water offers. I felt my heart soften, like drought hardened soil after rain. I hadn't realized until then how much I'd been projecting that hurt onto other relationships, holding back for fear my trust would be abused again. And that was just one phone call. It showed me how important it is to stay open-hearted as much as we can, to not let hurts close us down but to be honest and acknowledge what we've done, others too, and to reach out if we need to. And we do need to because we aren't the only ones impacted by whether our hearts stay open or not. As I look at Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman, I'm struck by just how much this shaped their meeting. Jesus' openness to her, especially as she pushed back, gave her space to trust, to let down her guard and to be more open to him, and which in turn gave her the freedom to be open with the people in her community. This is something we can cultivate by taking time at the end of the day to reflect, to admit if we've hurt others, been hurt, and if needed to seek redress. As we do we keep our hearts open to others, and help others remain open as well.

What a precious and healing gift Jesus offers, not just this Sunday but every day. He is always at the well, inviting us into open-hearted relationships, possible through the spring of living water that is always within us. It cleanses us of our past, keeps our hearts soft, helps us to connect and reconnect with others. May we be open to this living water, to God ever ready to refresh and to renew us. Amen.