

# St James United Church



Message for March 8, 2026

Third Sunday in Lent

“Called to be Water” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Ex 17:1-7; Jn 4:1-41; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Theory of Water: Nishnaabe Maps to the Times Ahead*

So far this Lent, we’ve mostly reflected on our individual spiritual identity. Week one we looked at how we can approach our spiritual selves positively rather than with the judgements that creep into this season. Then last week we also acknowledged the need to be realistic, the outbreak of war a reminder of how much we can get mired in personal attachments and grievances and so need to use a season like this to realign ourselves with God’s way rather than our own.

But as we get ready to embark on a listening process as a congregation, discerning where God is calling us, it is important for us to consider our collective identity too, at what we share together. That is the context of the reading from Exodus. Since last week’s passage when Abraham and Sarah left Haran, their descendants have become a nation. Admittedly that is not one hundred percent positive as they collectively complain to Moses, but it does reveal the power of a shared story. They were led by God out of slavery and in the midst of their complaint is communal trust that God will respond. God did just that, giving them water from the rock.

Water further binds them together. Water is means to spiritual union in our gospel too as Jesus speaks with a Samaritan woman traditionally known as Photina, the enlightened one, honoured for bringing others to faith. The conversation is set not long after Nicodemus’ chat with Jesus about being born through water and Spirit, set too after a debate about baptism. This meeting takes place at a well, biblically where people find a spouse. Together these elements reveal how baptism is about relationship, joining us to Christ and each other. It’s a source of shared renewal as well as personal, Jesus’ promise of living water to Photina impacting the whole town.

So, what is the impact of that living water? To answer, I’d like to look at the qualities of real water, with thanks to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson for her teachings in *Theory of Water: Nishnaabe Maps to the Times Ahead*. The first reflection is one I point out to people preparing for baptism, how water is where life began on this planet, evident in how we begin life in amniotic fluid. As Leanne observed, water, the lifeblood of Mother Earth, is an element that wants to give life. In it we’re embraced, feel safe. Water also connects us, not just as we travel on it like we often think, but when we lived in water, breathing it in so it became part of our bodies and out again where it became part of others’ bodies. That teaching takes connection to a whole new level. It speaks to me of how much we share, physically as well as spiritually. Our role as a faith community is to affirm this as we create a safe, nurturing space where people feel cared for,

supported, something in increasingly short supply in our world. We do this in many ways, including as we worship and pray together with many people taking on a role.

We do share much, but we are also different, and church is a place to learn how to be together in our differences, even if we don't agree. That too is in short supply. This dynamic is a component of a form of water we've seen a lot of lately - snow. When snow falls, the crystalline arms of snowflakes are initially sharp. But when they come together, the arms become rounded so they can bond. We too help each other be less sharp, become gentler, approaching differences in opinion with curiosity, showing empathy and understanding, being accommodating. Some would see this as a weakness, but it helps us be stronger. We experience this in snow when shoveling. We know too well not to leave the task too long because snow becomes packed, is harder to move. Now this can be a challenge as we ponder possible change in our congregation. I'll admit to some frustration when I hear the words, "We've never done it that way." We can get too fixed. But holding together is also a superpower when we are ready for a change. We're able to keep going with it, even if it may be hard, because we do it together. This quality of snow is how we can make a snowperson, or carve blocks to make an igloo. We need this quality in the world, joined together in creativity in increasingly challenging times. Our world is much like Jesus'. He needed his disciples to hold together as they sought needed change, and asks the same of us.

This points to the last quality of water that Leanne spoke to, that is its persistence. We're familiar with water's ability to move, go around obstacles, find a way forward. But what does it do when trapped, enclosed in some way? It still makes a path, even if the timeline seems insurmountable. Long after other elements give up, water gently, persistently makes a hole, an undercut, until it feels like a miracle as a rupture suddenly occurs and everything changes. We need that kind of persistence in our world, as we take Jesus' way of love to heart. It's a reminder that our role as church is not just for ourselves but what we do collectively in service, in the face of violence and injustice, respond to hate with love, to oppression with compassion, to anger with understanding. Non-violence is a slower process than armed aggression but if we use violence to bring change then we haven't changed anything, just who is the aggressor. Jesus shows another way, with Photina modelling the way that water goes to the lowest place. He humbly hears her, doesn't insist on his way. This makes a way for change to come from her, not forced on her. That too is a lesson for our times, as well as something we're to do here, taking time to hear each other, making sure everyone has a voice.

So, friends, let us be water and as such a source of new life not just for ourselves but those around us, for our world. We can be, but not on our own, not even as a community. Like for the people at Massah and Meribah, or for Photina and her village, it's God who refreshes us. Christ shares his love, helping us soften our edges to join us together, to feel connection, not just to care for each other but model this life-nurturing way in our world, giving us patience as we keep seeking change, as we empower rather than power over each other. So, let's follow the life-giving, transforming way of water. We can, we will, in Christ. Amen.