

The first week of Lent, we were invited to think about Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, and about **Sand**. The second week, the lectionary reminded us that the Spirit blows where it wills, and that our God is on the move- we thought about **Wind**. This third week, we are invited to think about **Water**, and about this story where Jesus and the woman at the well speak about being thirsty.

Jan Richardson says that if you want to know the story of God's transforming love for people, look for the water.

There is the water of creation that covers the earth, the water that Noah passes through safely, the water that divides so that God's own can walk on dry land to freedom. There is the well that sustains a dying Hagar in the desert, the water that spouts from the rock in the wilderness when Moses strikes it, and the water of the baptism story of a few weeks ago.

Water is essential for life, and especially so in the dry and desert region in which our faith was born. When it shows up in the Bible, it is always points toward God's redeeming, deliverance, and sustenance.

In our Lenten study folders, the invitation was to connect with and look for a **color from last week's artwork**- I picked the color green, I'm not sure why. It was a Kelly green, impossibly bright and vivid. And I largely forgot to look for it. Until Friday, when I looked out my back door toward the familiar foothills- and saw them transformed! They were an amazing, bright, vivid green that I have not seen since I've lived here. And then I remembered my prayer suggestion, and I sent up a prayer of thanks: "Wow!" Of course this is what happens to ordinary foothills, when they are showered with living water.

As the story begins, it is noon, and **this woman comes to the well alone**, and **Jesus asks her** for a drink.

Both these things are startling.

-Generally, in communities like this one where there is one water source, those who gather the water **come at the break of day** to get water for washing and cooking. Often they will visit, linger, chat. This woman has come at midday, the hottest part of the day, and she has come alone. Commentators have speculated as to why- but what we can know for certain is that her practice is unusual, and that her sense of alone-ness probably extends far beyond the act of drawing water..

- The other thing original readers would have noticed as startling was that in that time and place, **men did not speak to women** who were not part of their families. Jesus was counter-cultural in this way, consistently engaging women in conversation and inviting them into his community and ministry.

Startling as it was, the woman arrives, alone, at the well at midday and Jesus asks her for a drink, beginning a conversation with her that would change her life.

What is it about this conversation that held such power for her, and for the gospel writer, and for us?

I think that in it we see

The genius of Jesus, the transforming power of the love of God:

He sees. He tells the truth. He loves.

He Sees her: including seeing that she still has something to give. Her mistakes and her sorrows are not HER. This business of 5 husbands may indicate promiscuity or damage done to others. It may simply indicate sorrow: that a first husband died and she automatically became the wife of his younger brother by law... but he SEES her. And we are still trying to learn to see in that way. How do we learn to see as Jesus sees, to see even the things that to many are invisible? This week a building housing transients a block away from here was burned- how will we 'see' those homeless people and find ways to help? Or parolees to our city- how do we learn to SEE the ones who are ready to transform their lives? Or children whose families are in disarray- Bobbie Terrell is being trained, right now, to serve as what is called a Court Appointed Special Advocate- a grownup who accompanies a child with no functioning family in the court system to SEE that child, and to provide friendship to the child and perspective to the court, so that wise and compassionate decisions are made, and lives are redeemed.]

For that matter, how about each other? How do we learn to truly SEE each other: our strengths and our sorrows as well as our idiosyncracies and the masks we wear?

Tells the truth- this is the part we have the most trouble with, I think. In the last year, one of the congregational stories I have heard repeated by people who love this community is that there have been painful divorces, some involving infidelity, at the center of our life in the 70's and 80's and 90's. This is a great example of the kind of pain that makes it hard to know how to tell the truth-

- to be harsh and condemning is to judge, and we know we don't want that
- to be silent is to condone and ignore, and we know we don't want that
- sometimes we become fatalistic and say, 'that's just how it is. This is a hard world, and people are imperfect, and infidelity happens. Well, this is partly true: life IS hard, and people ARE imperfect- but we aim to be DIFFERENT from the status quo of our culture, we aim to live a different life.
- So what does one say? I think these are the situations where we must find the courage to tell the truth- not in a punitive or condemning way, but in a way that articulates the consequences. And then we invite repentance and a fresh start. And we re-affirm our love for all who have suffered.

They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Finally, in this story, **Jesus Loves anyway** (and THAT is transformative)- The Session did this for me earlier this year. In a moment of anger at a meeting, I yelled at the Clerk of Session, in front of the entire group. And when the end of the meeting rolled around, and we were all asked to reflect on where we had sensed God's presence, I knew I had to own up to my appalling lack of judgment and grace. I was miserable. And when I looked

up and started to speak, I saw them- all of them- grinning at me. And I suddenly knew that they would love me even when I failed them. And that we could start over. And it changed me, it re-shaped a piece of my heart.

Jesus sees what she has suffered, and what part she may have played in her own suffering. And he also sees that she still has something to give, that her mistakes and her sorrows are not the sum total of who she is.

He tells her the truth.

He loves her anyway.

When he indicates that he has something to offer her, she says, “**The well is deep and you have no bucket.**”

How often do we feel that way: that we are thirsty, and we have no bucket- no way to help ourselves, no idea how to access resources that will make it better.

And even though she has no idea how he will get it, she says to him,

“**I want some of that water!**”

Smart woman. Perhaps all of us who show up on a Sunday, visitors and regulars alike, are here for the same reason. To varying degrees, we are thirsty, and we want some of that water. The road of life is long, (whether you are in high school, or trying to make life choices in your 20’s, or trying to work for justice~ the road is long), and the well is deep, and we have no bucket, .

How hard it is, sometimes, to ask for what we want or need. How hard it is to own or acknowledge our neediness.

But when we can, when we do, we make space for others to SEE, and to LOVE ANYWAY

And it is then that it can be said of us: *‘they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, they will know we are Christians by our love’*.

And here is the astonishing end to this story:

She leaves her bucket.

She has become the vessel (says Jan Richardson)

Her **Belovedness, God’s life, her connection to the Holy One** are inside her now. She knows, bcz of this experience of God’s real presence, that she is more than the sum total of her mistakes and doubts and sufferings.

Because she has met ‘the Sending God’, she is pouring out living water.

Her testimony changes people: “come and see. This is my experience. Come and see.”

She has become an impossibly **bright and vivid green**- she is transformed.

The well is deep. The wilderness is dry. Where do we get that water?

Well, if the story says anything, it says that it’s not about having the right bucket. The bucket, evidently, you can leave behind.

But “If you knew the Gift of God...” and who it is, right now, who is speaking to you.
You would ask. And you would be given what you thirst for.
Love that will not let you go.
Strength for your journey thru the wilderness
And healing.

Amen.