***LIVING WATER***

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Texts: John 4:1-30, 39-42 and Psalm 139:1-6

How quickly our world changes! In the space of a few days COVIN-19 has gone from a little known virus in China to a pandemic that upends lives around the globe. Stock markets plunge and rebound and plunge again, travel is disrupted, colleges send everyone home, schools shut their doors for a spell, and in the space of a few hours huge sporting events go from being played as planned to being played in empty arenas to being cancelled – which I guess leaves UVA as defending NCAA basketball champions for yet another year! Churches have altered communion practices, activities, and worship schedules – as you now know. Retirement homes are on lockdown; hospitals are besieged. Social distance is encouraged for all those in large groups, not just for those who haven’t showered lately. Just a couple of weeks ago none of this was part of our lives or seemed imminent, and our daily concerns seemed much less significant – in hindsight!

For many of you this is not the first time the world has gone through such sudden change. Some of you remember December 7, 1941, the day Pearl Harbor was bombed, and our nation was suddenly plunged into a world war. Some of you remember the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the anxiety and uncertain fear of those tumultuous days. Many of you remember 9/11 when the Twin Towers fell and a jet crashed in a Pennsylvania field and another into the Pentagon, and the world was suddenly a much more dangerous place. For some of you that world-changing event was much more personal – a dire diagnosis, the sudden death of a spouse or friend or child, a stroke or fall over a park bench or an accident that forced upon you a new normal which did not seem normal at all. Sometimes the world suddenly changes, and so does our perspective on life as we know it.

“*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change…*” (Ps. 46) Those words of the psalmist offer comfort in the times of tumultuous change and remind us that God is present in the midst of whatever earth-changing events occur in our lives. We do not face them alone. We need not fear the present or the future. For, God is there to sustain us, to offer a comforting shoulder to lean upon, to guide us, and to remind us that God is at work in the midst of any and all circumstances – including the current crisis.

This morning’s passage from John describing Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well describes a life-changing moment out of a seemingly ordinary moment. To that point in time the Samaritan woman’s life had been a total mess. She was a serial bride, married five times and now living with a potential number six. The community had passed judgment upon her, pushing her to the fringe of society in a form of social isolation that kept her at a perpetually safe distance from any 1st century COVID-19 outbreak, but also very much alone. She came to the well, not with the other women in the cool of the morning, but alone at noon in the heat of the day. Lepers at least had other lepers to console them. She had no one; she arrived at the well alone with bucket in hand to draw her water and go home. The well was the center of community life, but it was available to her only when the community had gone home. It is one thing to isolate yourself to avoid a virus. It is quite another to be isolated by your bad life choices.

Remarkably Jesus reached out to her, violating more than one social norm. He was a Jew, she was a Samaritan, and Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans – that is why Jesus uses the Samaritan as the hero in his parable about neighbors: no one expected the good Samaritan to do anything good! The woman at the well was a disdained woman, he a highly regarded man, and it was highly improper for him to speak with her given the gender and social distance between them. Yet Jesus, knowing who she was and disregarding the taboos that would keep him from speaking with her, did so nevertheless. Just as he called Zacchaeus out of the tree, Jesus chose to take the initiative and cross societal boundaries to change a person’s life.

He asked her for water on a hot day, but then spoke of living water that he would provide. And while she was puzzled by what he meant by that – water that flowed in a stream seemed absurd since he had no bucket and no flowing stream nearby – she came to realize that the living water of which he spoke was very different. It was the kind of water that satisfied more than thirst,

the kind of water that offered eternal life,

the kind of water that messiah might offer,

but surely not the kind of water that a solitary Jew sitting on a dusty bench at a public well could offer. At least that is what she thought even as she asked for some of that living water that he offered.

As if that behavior wasn’t strange enough, Jesus began to tell the woman about her past, mentioned her five husbands and the one with whom she lived who was not her husband, and it didn’t take her long to perceive that he was a prophet. Samaritans had recognized no prophets since Moses, yet she called him a prophet. Anyone could be foolish enough to break social customs, and more than one person had strange conversations around that well, but to detail a person’s past – a past he had no way of knowing – that was more than a little unsettling. Would you really want someone to know you that well, someone who knew everything about you – even those deep dark secrets that you’ve hidden away from the rest of the world? Jesus knew that woman, knew who she was and who she had been, and he told her that he knew. That is what she proclaimed loud and long when she returned to town with her invitation – “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” It wasn’t with fear that she said it, but with the curious question that whet the appetites of all who heard: “He can’t be the Messiah, can he?”

Jesus intimated that messiah was exactly who he was. He told her that neither Jerusalem nor Mt. Gerizim was the real focus of worship, that it was God who was the focus, the One to be worshipped in spirit and in truth. Those old battles

about the right place to worship or the right way to worship,

about the right sacrifices or the right words or the right people with

whom to sit in the pews,

about the right dress for worship or the right music to be sung,

seem pretty petty when it gets right down to it. Our worship is not about the place or the people; it is about the God whom we worship. If we don’t have that right, then all the rest is for naught. At times maybe we’ve been too concerned with the form and not concerned enough with the substance of our worship – and our service for that matter. Jesus reminded her and us, that we are people of faith – that our worship begins and ends with God and that anything short of that, anything done for our own purposes or to perpetuate divisions among us, is not worship in spirit and in truth. That should characterize our worship within the walls of the church, but also our worship within the walls of our homes when COVID-19 isolates us there. All of it is centered on God and God’s presence with us wherever we are!

The woman never got her water from the well. She ran into town to tell the people what she had seen and heard and experienced, forgetting about the taunts of days gone by. And whether it was her enthusiasm or her message or simple curiosity or all of the above, some of the people went to see and hear him. And because they did, they came to believe that this Jew named Jesus was the Savior who speaks the truth of God, who is the Messiah of God, the One who offers living water that you can’t hold with any cup or bucket or barrel. It is living water that you must sip from the cup he offers. It’s not much help on a hot day, but it is life-sustaining every day, especially on days like today to ease the fears of a pandemic. It is the kind of water that fills you to overflowing with peace like a river and joy like a fountain and love like an ocean, the kind that you want to drink deeply of again and again, the kind that changes your life and your outlook on death.

The encounter with Jesus was life-changing for that Samaritan woman as she sipped the living water he offered. For us who face the challenges of this virus that has turned our world upside down, Jesus offers that same living water, water that is offered to calm our fears and to grant us strength and to give us hope regardless of what may come in the days ahead, because our hope is in the One who offers it to us. Drink deeply, my friends. Go to that well frequently in these coming days and drink deeply. Drink deeply when you are overwhelmed by world events or by worry or by simple boredom from the isolated waiting. Drink deeply, for it will satisfy your thirsty soul and your troubled spirit and your anxious mind. It is as close as a prayer, as close as the God who is with you always, the God who offers us all living water for these tumultuous times. Drink deeply and be at peace! Amen