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First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, AL

Living Water
John 4:5-42

These are strange times we live in, my friends. I have thought for some time that we should set up a live stream or film our service to be able to reach people online – so, OPA! It’s happening!

I don’t know about you, but I am surprised that we are here, that this public health crisis has escalated so quickly. Maybe you feel the same way. Maybe you think we are overreacting, or maybe you’ve read the statistics and are worried about what might happen in the weeks to come to people whom we love. To us. To our families. To our church family. So I’m glad we’ve found a way to be together, even just virtually, to be reminded of our connection to one another, and to remember the promises of God: promises of grace like living water, that will become for us like a spring of everlasting life.

Your session and Terry and I didn’t make the decision to suspend in-person worship lightly or easily. Many of us felt the need to be together in the midst of this crisis, and we’re a hearty congregation – we don’t call off worship for much of anything. In January of 2015, when snow and ice blanketed the city, the church stayed open all weekend, with a wedding on Saturday and worship on Sunday morning. We got a few new members, actually, because we were one of the only churches downtown open on that day. But this week, we decided to stop gathering in person because we strongly believe it is the right thing to do. But even though we aren’t gathered together here physically, the work of the church continues...

At my installation service 5.5 years ago, Elizabeth Goodrich reminded us that before the first mines were dug and the first fires were lit in this city, we were here, on this corner, bearing witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. We survived the cholera epidemic of 1873, even though the wife of the pastor died. We weathered the storms of segregation and civil rights, fires which forged us into the church we are today – a church which welcomes all whom God welcomes, where all are welcomed and valued, where we speak up, reach out, and build bridges in a fractured city and world. And y’all, we

overcame a year without heat or air conditioning in the deep South, so here's hoping we can handle some social distancing to slow the coronavirus pandemic. The introverts among us have been preparing for this their whole lives.

Whenever I preach from the lectionary, I'm struck by how much the Spirit breathes life into the text that makes it speak to our particular time and place. This story, the story of Christ and the woman at the well came alive for me in new ways this week.

I've always read this encounter as a glimpse of the boundary breaking love of Jesus. See, Jews and Samaritans avoided each other at all costs, especially if they were not of the same gender. There are serious social norms that separate Jesus from this Samaritan woman, but when they meet at the well he asks her for help, and strikes up a conversation.

I have to wonder why she went to the well at high noon. Jesus was there because he was on a long journey and needed a drink – he was waiting for someone with a bucket to draw water for him. But the woman – people typically went to draw water at the beginning of the day, in the cool of the morning. At high noon, when the sun was high, it was too hot to be pulling up a bucket of water. Someone who goes to the well at that time doesn't want to be seen by others. But Jesus sees her for who she is – a woman who for whatever reason, is seeking some social distancing. A woman whose life has probably been difficult, and tragic, surviving five husbands. A woman who had found a way to survive without one. Instead of passing judgment as her neighbors surely had, when he sees her, and talks with her, Jesus reveals who he really is, too – the source of living water, the promised savior. This revelation bridges the gap between them, inspires her not just to believe the good news, but to run and share it with everybody else.

Reading the text this week, in the middle of an unprecedented global crisis, to a congregation safely spread out across the city, gathering virtually for worship for perhaps the very first time, something new stood out to me. It's interesting that Jews and Samaritans clearly disagreed about the proper way and place to worship. Samaritans, the woman says, worshipped on Mt. Gerazim, but Jews worshipped in the temple in Jerusalem. It's important to remember that John was writing toward the end of the first century, a few decades after the temple had been destroyed, so he had seen his community of Christ believers and the Jewish community struggle with how and where

to worship in the aftermath of that tragedy. The hour is coming, and is now here, when God will be worshipped in spirit and truth, Jesus says. The kingdom has come near in him – and God is let loose in the world, changing what it looks like to be faithful, changing how and where worship happens.

It is unsettling that our sacred space is not a safe space for us to gather together, at least for a while. It is different to gather for common worship in this way. But what a gift it is that we can be together virtually! Thank God for technology! And this is a chance for us to learn resilience, to be church in a new way.

In the winter of 2005, the First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts burned. They didn't know it at the time, but there was a faulty furnace in the basement that sparked such a blaze the whole place went up in flames. The new pastor lived in the manse next door, a beautiful old Victorian home with her three little kids and her husband. They stood across the street huddled in jackets, watching the church burn, wondering if their house would be next. It was so cold, the newspaper wrote that “the charred remains [of the church] were encased in ice as the water from the fire hoses froze.”¹

When it was over, the only thing left standing was the steeple, and a few walls – the council bound together and the church continued to worship – first under a tent on a patch of AstroTurf (“The sod of dreams,” they called it), then at a nearby church, and finally in a big, ugly, wood-paneled trailer they called “the sacred double-wide.”² They brought in folding chairs and card tables and bibles and a coffee pot and a keyboard and they had church right there, in a double wide, right there on the front lawn of their burned out old church, right there on Centre Street. Worship in the sacred double-wide.

And you know what? When the kids were there, and the old people, and the new folks and the hungry folks and the students and the weirdos and all the wonderful people who had made First Baptist their home – when they were

¹ Ballou, Brian, “Five years after fire, Boston church set to rise from ashes,” The Boston Globe, January 17, 2010, http://archive.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/01/17/five_years_after_fire_jamaica_plain_church_set_to_rise_from_ashes/

² Yvonne Abraham, “A story of rebirth, ending still to come,” The Boston Globe, April 8, 2012, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2012/04/07/story-rebirth-ending-still-come/esUlqeOzfQNY2v2iAKASoJ/story.html>.

all there together that trailer, with its laminate walls and floors that shook with every hymn was a beautiful sight, a tribute to hope and resilience and maybe even to God herself.

Now I know that a single church fire and a deadly pandemic are not the same thing. But my point is this: the church can be church in a beautiful old building or in a doublewide trailer, on a mountain or in a temple, on a trail, on a beach, in the kitchen at First Light, or even in a hundred living rooms around the city, or hundreds of thousands of streaming services across the country and around the world. We can be the church wherever hearts are joined in prayer, and voices are raised in thanksgiving and lament and praise of the God who created us and who promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age. Wherever we stop to rest in the mystery and wonder of God for a while. Whenever we sit quietly and read scripture, and think and talk together about what it might mean. Wherever hands reach out – not to touch, but to offer support where it is needed and to work for healing of broken bodies, broken hearts, a broken world. In these strange and uncertain times, my friends, let's be the church – the body of Christ in the world.

Let's see each other and be honest with each other, as Jesus saw that woman and told her the truth as he saw it about both of them. Let's offer help when we can and ask for help when we need it. Let's sing our favorite hymns, the songs that speak to our highest hopes and comfort our deepest fears, the ones we know by heart. For if Christ is Lord over heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing? Let's share the living water of love and grace and mercy so that no one's well runs dry, and so that everyone, everyone, everyone's hands are washed. Amen.