

Embodying God's Presence
March 15, 2020 – Lent III

Exodus 17: 1-7

John 4: 5-42

It has been quite a week, with the [CoVid-19](#) virus being declared a pandemic and Saskatchewan getting its first few actual and presumptive cases. Things are developing rapidly and our plans to address the concerns of the pandemic have changed daily. This may be our last time to gather in person for a while and it will be important to keep in touch and support each other as we move through this time together. There may be times, and maybe some are feeling it now, that we might wonder where God is in all this. As we self-isolate or feel isolated by imposed restrictions, it can be easy to lose hope, to feel down or depressed, and we may even think that God has abandoned us.

This is how the Israelites felt in the desert. In our reading from Exodus, the people of God, find themselves in the desert, thirsty, and worried that they are going to die. They complain to Moses that he has brought them out into the desert to die of thirst. It seems they have forgotten all that has happened before, that God saved them from the Egyptian army, gave them manna in the desert when they were hungry and guided them through the wilderness through a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud during the day. Yet they wonder if God has abandoned them to die of thirst. Moses cries to God, “what shall I do with these people?” He is told to take his staff and strike a rock. God has not abandoned them, for when Moses does this, water springs forth.

Now we may not experience God's presence with us in such miraculous ways, but God works through us and God's love and light is in us. It is that love experienced and the support that we share among one another that can give us hope and sustain us through challenging times. We have a choice in these times. We can question God and where God is or we can trust that God is with us and join together to support one another and be God's community for those around us.

The woman at the well, came to trust God through Jesus, although it was not immediate. In our reading from John, Jesus decides to leave Judea because he was worried about the religious authorities and decides to return to Galilee through Samaria. There was a cultural and racist divide between the Jewish

people and the Samaritans. Samaritans were part of the Israelite history and ethnicity but the Judeans considered the Israelite pedigree of the Samaritans to be tainted due to intermarriage among the Assyrian conquerors. They held different beliefs but had the same roots as Israelites. Jewish people avoided going to Samaria, so for Jesus to intentionally go through Samaria was a big deal. He was going to continue expanding his message.

The woman who came to the well was doing so at the heat of the day, in order to avoid any of the other women. She had been shunned by the community and did not want to meet anyone. So, when she saw Jesus at the well, she would have been concerned. Then she noticed he was Jewish and he began to speak to her, asking her for a drink, which as a woman and a Samaritan would have been forbidden, along with the fact that Samaritans and Jews were not to drink from the same cup. She was bold in responding to him and continuing the conversation. At first, she is unable to understand Jesus' metaphorical language and wanting literal living water when he is offering her something very different. It is not until he tells her what he knows about her – that she does not have a husband but has had five, that she realizes he is a prophet. They then engage in a theological conversation that ends up with the message that the two communities will come together. Jesus provides a message of reconciliation and peace into their history of alienation and conflict. Jesus declares himself to her as the Messiah, a rare occurrence in the gospels. She understands the importance of this interaction with this man, Jesus and becomes a witness to the people of the community for Jesus and brings them to see him. He stays with them for two days upon their invitation.

This is an incredible story of how Jesus breaks down barriers and finds common ground between two disparate communities. This week I have been listening to a number of online discussions on the [Courageous Faith Summit](#) hosted by Convergence US, a ministry of The United Church of Christ that helps congregations navigate being church in our changing times. The summit has prominent speakers such as Brian McLaren, Diana Butler Bass, Richard Rohr, and Jonathan Brooks, just to name a few of the 40 which continues on this week – and it's free. I was listening to Bishop Yvette Flunder, of The United Church of Christ City of Refuge Congregation, and she shared this wonderful story about finding common ground. She was visiting Jerusalem and was at a service at the church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is broken up there in various orthodox groups, Armenian,

Coptic, Greek orthodox. She was adopted by the Coptics because she looks like them. They brought her into their group and gave her a book with the words to the song in their language. Yvette could not understand the words but did recognize the word Hallelujah. The Coptic group were moving and jumping up and down to the music and she began jumping up and down with them. Pretty soon she connected to the music and them, then they would get to the part where they sang Hallelujah and Yvette would sing it fervently. After a minute or so when they got to the Hallelujah, they would point to her and that became her solo. They connected in this way. She said, this iteration of her does not have problem with the Coptic tradition, but a previous iteration of her would have. This is what she means when she previously said in her talk that we need to drop our silos. We have to let the sides down to see where the lies are that have made us separate and see if we can find our commonality. She asks: Where are the hallelujahs we can sing together? This is an important message for our time, for our church, for our communities. Where do we find common ground among one another?

This disease of CoVid-19 does not discriminate, so let's join together to support one another in our common experience, not only within our church community but in our neighbourhoods, our work communities and other communities we are connected to. Some may think that actions that are being taken are extreme and responding out of fear. I had a question to myself this week as I was driving and listening to the radio and that question was, what is the difference between fear and a measured response? There is a difference. We have seen fear come into play when people overstock, on food, hand sanitizer or toilet paper, such that there isn't enough for others. We presently can't get hand sanitizer for the church including for our dispensers. The actions we are taking and that many in the country are taking are a measured response to work to slow the spread of the virus. The greatest concern is that as the virus catches hold here, if we don't take measures to slow it down, the medical system will be overwhelmed, as has been the case in Italy. The goal is to lower the peak and spread it out so that those who need the care as they get the virus, will be able to receive it within the resources we have. Handwashing, staying home if you are sick, covering your mouth with your sleeve when you cough, social isolation are all effective measures to slow the spread, so we all can support one another and get the care we need.

In the gospel, Jesus offers the woman and us lifegiving water. When we embrace the life and love of God in Christ, that water offers us hope and quenches our

thirst in the dry times when we grieve, fear, are lonely or depressed. We experience that lifegiving water through the love and support of those around us. God works in and through us, and is with us in that love expressed and lived.

As we move through this time, may we draw on that source of strength and love that is embodied in this community, even if we can't gather together in the same way. May we Remember what God has done for you in the past, how you have felt supported when things were tough. May we know that God has not abandoned us and is with us, as we work together to stem the tide of this virus and be God's community of love and hope for all those around us.