

## **A Time to Grow: Water**

March 20, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

**Psalm 63:1-8**

**John 4:5-29**

So today we are continuing our journey through Lent with our sermon series titled “A Time to Grow,” where we are exploring the garden as a metaphor for our souls. On Ash Wednesday we talked about soil. Dirt. Dust. The mess out of which we come. And then, two Sundays ago we turned to a conversation about order. About planning and preparation for what we are going to plant, and when, and where. And the nature of sin as that which disrupts God’s perfect ordering of creation. Last week, we talked about the process of thinning a garden – of pulling up the excess plants that get in the way of growth, and we considered what within our souls might need to be “thinned out” or “pulled up” so that we can receive the nourishment that God offers.

Today we are turning our attention to something that maybe seems obvious for any conversation about gardening – and that is water. Plants cannot grow without it. Neither can people, for that matter. Water is absolutely, critically necessary for life.

And I think that probably, when I think about all of my own gardening misadventures and mistakes – of which there have been many – probably about 90% of them boil down to water. Usually, one of two things would happen. (And remember, most of my gardening has been done in the desert).

First – and most commonly – I would plant something with high hopes and high expectations. I would prepare the soil. I’d read up on the seeds, I’d plant them where they would get the proper amount of sunlight, and I would water them. And then the next day, I would water them. And then the same, the next day. But round about day 4 or 5 I would start to get bored. And I would start to forget to give them water.

Now, here in Pennsylvania, the soil tends to be pretty forgiving. And sometimes God will come along and water our plants for us in the form of rain. But that didn’t happen so much in the desert, and if I would get bored or distracted or lose interest – my garden would pay the price.

Or here would be my other mistake. Because I lived in the desert, I would wisely plant something that traditionally grows well in dry soil. Something like lavender. Or aloe. But then, I would start thinking about all those plants that I had killed when I forgot to water them, and so I would give these desert plants *extra* water. Too much water. And they, too, would die.

Water is a good thing. Necessary for life. Absolutely critical. The human body is made up of 60% water, and most of us walk around chronically dehydrated most of the time. And for plants, water is even more necessary. Some plants are as much as 95% water.

But water can also be dangerous. Hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, flash floods. Too much water can be every bit as damaging as not enough.

In scripture we hear a lot about water. People gathering water; God leading the Psalmist “beside the still waters,” our souls longing for God as a deer “pants for streams of water;” Moses parting the water; God destroying all life in a flood; Jesus calming the waters of the raging seas.

And in our gospel reading today we see Jesus talking a lot about water, in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. This story is one of my favorites, because in this story what you see is *not* what you get. This story is filled to the brim with assumptions and expectations – both for us as modern-day readers, and also for first-century readers. Although, the cultural assumptions would have been very different than they are now.

So first off, let’s talk a little bit about Samaria.

If you will remember your Old Testament history, after the reign of King Solomon, Solomon’s sons Rehoboam and Jeroboam basically led Israel into a civil war, which left the once-unified country of Israel divided into two separate kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Now, in this split the northern kingdom got the name. Israel. But the southern kingdom walked away with the better deal, because they got the big city – Jerusalem, and the temple in Jerusalem. Which was basically the center of worship for all the Israelite people. So, the folks in the northern kingdom had to come up with a different place to worship. And so they built a lavish temple of their own in the town of Samaria.

And the folks in the southern kingdom didn’t really take very kindly to that. Because according to them, Jerusalem was the *only* proper place to worship. And they felt that the temple in Samaria made a mockery of God.

So you can see that there is already some bad blood between the two regions.

But as time goes on, politics in the Ancient Near East get really messy, and eventually the kingdom of Assyria invades the northern Kingdom of Israel, and scatters the Israelites far and wide. Ultimately, the Israelite people end up intermarrying with the Assyrian people, and a lot of these families wind up settling in what was formerly the Northern kingdom (which by now has been re-named Samaria), taking on cultural and religious customs of both the ancient Hebrews and the ancient Assyrians. So, they become a kind of “melting pot”, both religiously and culturally. And that was really, *really* big “no-no” for those of the Hebrew faith. So now, the people in Judea believed

that not only is the *temple* in Samaria a mockery, but now their religious traditions and customs of the Samaritans have been corrupted by Assyrian influences and pagan religious customs.

Now, at some point after the exile, a sizable number of Jews decided to migrate northward from the land of Judea, up through Samaria, and into the region of Galilee, where they finally settled. And so Galilee became the largest center of Judaism in what had once been the northern kingdom. Jesus himself is from Galilee.

But there is a little bitty problem here. The fastest way to get to Galilee from Judea is to go straight up through Samaria. Travelling by foot, it would take about 3 days to get from Judea to Galilee that way. But because the Jewish people hated the Samaritans so much, they would not take the most direct route. They would take the long way around, avoiding the Samaritans at all costs, and making their journey not a 3 day journey, but a 7 day one.

That level of hatred takes commitment.

So in our scripture today, Jesus and his disciples find themselves in Samaria. Evidently Jesus has decided that he wants to travel between Galilee and Judea, and he is going to take the direct path. Which has the disciples on-edge to begin with. They are not comfortable. They want to get through there and out of there as fast as they possibly can because they do not trust the Samaritan people.

But Jesus has other ideas. And in the middle of the day, in the heat of the day, when they are all getting scorched by the brutal desert sun, Jesus decides to stop for a drink of water.

Now, that sounds innocent enough. Nothing wrong with water. They find a well to stop at and the disciples decide to take a little side trip into town to grab some lunch – and probably to gripe a little bit about why Jesus decided to go this way and not take the long way around.

And while they are gone, a Samaritan woman comes and meets Jesus at the well.

Now, this is the point where we as modern-day readers don't really think much of this encounter, but early Jewish readers would have immediately clued in on something.

Throughout the Old Testament, when men and women both find themselves together at a well, it is for one reason and one reason only: a marriage proposal. Jacob and Rachel got engaged at a well. *This very well*, in fact. Abraham's servant meets Rebekah at a well to bring Rebekah back as a bride for Isaac. And Moses and Zipporah also meet at a well.

In that time and culture, it was the women's job to gather and carry the water, and usually the community well would become a social gathering spot for young women in the cool evening hours. The men knew this, and so the well is where young men would often go to meet and court eligible women – without having to fear running into their fathers or brothers or other family members.

But our woman in today's story has been...shall we say...unlucky in love. We don't know her story. Tradition has kinda labeled her as a "loose woman" at best, or a "prostitute" at worst, but I think that is unfair. All we know is that she has had many different husbands, and we don't know what happened to any of them. Maybe they died, and this woman is living with one grief on top of another, on top of another. Or maybe they divorced her because she couldn't have children. And again, grief upon grief upon grief.

She's living with someone now who isn't her husband – which is very common today, but it was not at all common back then. She's basically given up. She knows that she is not wanted; that she is cast aside, and she has been abandoned. Repeatedly.

And so she has no desire to show up at this well in the cool evening hours where the young women are coming, all doled up and hoping to meet their prince charming. She's played that game, and it hasn't worked out for her, and she just doesn't have the energy anymore. And plus, it is just plain painful. A reminder of everything that she has lost. And so instead, she walks perhaps as much as miles in the 100-degree summer heat out to this well – the absolute worst time to be out and about – because she knows that in the brutal midday heat there is virtually no chance that she will see another human being there. And most especially a man, looking for conversation.

Surprise!

And I have to laugh, because when the disciples come back...imagine what *they* must have been thinking. They were absolutely flabbergasted. Because they know what it means when a man talks to a woman at a well. That could mean only one thing. Wedding bells. And a *Samaritan* woman, at that? Really, Jesus? Really??? First you make us tromp through Samaria, which we didn't want to do in the first place, and now this? What in the world are you thinking??? Have you lost your ever-loving mind???

But as we as the reader know, marriage was the furthest thing from Jesus' mind. What he was thinking about, was water.

Because here's the thing about water. It always flows to the lowest spot. Water in the air falls to the ground. Water uphill flows downhill. Water on the surface of the ground sinks down into the ground.

That is true about water, and the same thing is true about living water – the kind of water that Jesus is offering. Always flowing downward, reaching into the deepest, darkest, places. Reaching people when they have reached their lowest point.

That's why Jesus travels through Samaria, and not around it. Because the living water has to flow to those who are cast out and hated. The lowest spot. The place everyone else avoids

That's why he goes to that well and meets with a woman in the heat of the day. I mean, being a woman in that day and age was hard enough. But being a woman who had fallen so far that she didn't even feel like she could show her face around the rest of society's outcasts? That's pretty bad.

And yet, that's exactly where the living water flows. To the lowest spot. To those who are forgotten. Cast out. Grieving. Abandoned. To those who are unappreciated and misunderstood. To those who are unfairly judged by everybody else. The living water will flow where nobody else wants to go, bringing life to the places where everything looks to be dry and barren and forgotten.

Into hospital rooms and nursing homes. Into refugee camps and prisons. Into places torn apart by war – civil wars that tear unified countries apart and wars of power where dictators try to expand their reach.

God's living water flows into courtrooms and morgues; into places where grief and pain and loss and anger seep out of the very walls. It flows into broken hearts and crushed dreams and brains and bodies addled by sickness and disease. And it flows into you, and it flows into me, in those times and seasons and moments when we are at our absolute worst. Those moments when we would rather face a scorching desert sun than face another human being. Or when we would rather double the time it takes to get somewhere, because of the enemies that we don't want to face along the way. Those moments when we feel alone and isolated and cast aside. Those moments when we look at life and all it looks like is one big pile of regrets. Those moments when we are blinded by anger or hatred for the "other."

"The water that I give you," Jesus tells us, "will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." A water that never runs dry. That knows what we need – and how much and when. A water that stops at nothing to reach us. A water that never forgets us, never abandons us, and flows downward into the deepest parts of ourselves when we need it the most. A water that brings us back to life when we are parched and dry, and that reminds us of who – and whose – we are.