

A sermon preached by the Reverend Tuck Bowerfind at Grace Episcopal Church  
Lexington, The Third Sunday of Lent, March 15, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4 5-42

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

I love the way the gospel illuminates new contexts and circumstances. The way new contexts and circumstances illuminate the gospel. The word of God, our Savior Jesus Christ, is living and we are in a dynamic relationship with the saving Word.

Every day is another confrontation with our mortality, another crisis of need and want resulting in another quarrel among us. Despite the fact that the Lord of life is always with us, among us, the Water of life is available for us. Oh that today we would listen to his voice.  
Psalm 95

When we take a breath, we can see that this virus is revealing our unity, our community, not only as a human family, but as a human family in an ecosystem that will always be something of a wilderness, no matter how domesticated we would like it to become.

When the plagues beset Egypt, the most frightening thing was how simple and elemental they were – darkness, locusts, boils, hail, frogs. There is no protection against such things. Just as there is no protection against breathing and drinking and communicating.

But the Lord's message to Egypt was simple. There is no protection for injustice, for oppression, for violence, for the exploitation of the poor. Because the elements of God's creation are truth and spirit (John 4) and justice,

humility, loving kindness, (Micah 6) these are food, water and air for the soul. No plague that afflicts the body can stop you from being able to practice them, in fact, every plague will drive us toward renewing our practice together.

I love how the context for the dialogue with Jesus in John 4 couldn't be much different than the one we engaged last week from John 3. Last week it was at night with Nicodemus, a great man of learning and authority and privilege, in the hostile environment of Jerusalem. Today the dialogue is at full on noon with a nameless woman of Samaria, (you don't get less powerful or privileged), in the surprisingly hospitable environment of Samaria.

The setting is a well that has been providing water for over 1600 years since the days of Jacob the patriarch.

And in this ancient, remote setting John shows us the Word of God doing what Nicodemus couldn't comprehend, giving a new birth from above. The Sower sows the seed (kerygma) indiscriminately, delighted to see it spring up and take root and bear fruit a hundred-fold.

How does the new birth happen? How does the seed grow? The reality of Jesus is revealed through engagement, through conversation in stages. It begins with the surprising reality of Jewish origin. Salvation is from the Jews. But aren't Jews a self-quarantined people? What is

Judaism doing outside of its limits, interacting with an unclean woman of an unclean people? Then the journey moves into the territory of the patriarchs, Jacob and Joseph who are the common ancestors of Jews and Samaritans and Christians, and common relatives of our Muslim brothers and sisters. Then the conversation journeys into the territory of the prophets who have no particular origin or nationality – they arise wherever and whenever God calls and sends them. Then it moves into the territory of the messianic hope for the Day of the Lord shared by all Jews, Samaritans, Christians and Muslims. And then, after all other categories have been exhausted, the reality dawns that in Jesus the Savior of the World, the living Word of God, has visited with us face to face.

Today, in this contest, we can see that the Word of God is like a virus, a divine virus of liberation that spreads from person to person for the sake of the whole community. Some, like Nicodemus, might rather protect themselves from it. It seems to be leading to the overturn and destruction of an order that serves them well. Perhaps they want to dismiss it as nothing. It will go away. All that matters is a return to business as usual. Keep the woman in her place. She is just a woman (of Samaria), why talk to her, why offer her eternal life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Keep such gifts as justice, loving-kindness, humility and the power and glory of God for the chosen ones.

But the Word of God will infect those without the immune system to keep it out.

So we must pray, keep us thirsty for your Word O God. Keep us moving on the path of the revelation of your reality in our lives. Make us carriers of your infectious justice and reconciling love.

This past week Martin and Sharon Jeffries offered us some dialogue with God to refresh and inspire us in our journey.

Sharon encouraged us to see beyond the categories we use to judge whether a neighbor is worth our time. She encouraged us to look for the way each person we meet is reflecting the light of God.

I think we can see that Jesus is doing just this. As the woman at the well is trying to see and understand who he is, he is drawing her out like living water, looking for her to emerge from beneath the burden of the categories that have been thrust upon her, her own internalized oppression. How amazing when she becomes the evangelist, full of new life, new enthusiasm to give water to her townspeople, even as she leaves her now useless bucket at the well. To see her and her townspeople reborn to life is food for Jesus, this is how he gets his kicks, this is why he has come into the world, what he wanted: to set us free.

Martin Jeffries wanted us to know that he sees this congregation, he sees us, from the perspective of a Black man. He told us how important it has been for the Black community in this city, in this commonwealth, in this nation that we changed our name. With tears of gratitude, he wanted us to know that within the Black community the response has been – “If they can do that in Lexington, then maybe there is still hope.” He wanted us to know that he knows it hasn’t been easy. He knows we lost membership because of the time of quarrelling. But the suffering we have experienced, especially the loss of young families during the time of quarreling, is for the sake of endurance and perseverance (Romans 5), not for the sake of regret or looking back.

“Don’t let rhetoric of the world dishearten you,” he said. Build on the work you have begun. Reach out to build a relationship with your Black neighbors. Listen to the truth they have to share about what it is like to be Black in Lexington. If they push back at you, saying what do you know or care about us, then push

back at them with the love of God that has been poured into your hearts through the Holy spirit. The Black community understands the Love of God. Stay rooted in God's love. If you will keep moving beyond the old self-quarantine of race and privilege, you will find new life together in the wilderness.

Perhaps this virus, this assault on our bodies, is an opportunity for us to ask how our Black neighbors are faring, is their experience the

same as ours, what can we do to see ourselves as one Lexington, one Rockbridge County on the same journey with the same Savior? How can we keep engaging the living saving Word of God together for the sake of the whole world?

As we ask God to help us develop a vaccine for covid 19, let us not fail to also ask God to keep giving us liberating rebirth in the water of Life.