

sermons at saint mark’s

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THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 15, 2020

EXODUS 17:1-7; PSALM 95; ROMANS 5:1-11; JOHN 4:5-42

**SACRAMENTAL GRACE IS NOT QUARANTINED**

### http://www.ecva.org/exhibition/VPPreview/images3/skinner4.jpg*[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Forty years ago this summer a massive heat wave crashed down across a broad swath of the U.S., causing people to adjust their behaviors in order to be safe. In Arkansas, where I lived at the time, 47 days that summer topped 100 degrees, a record that still stands. The beloved 100-year old cherry tree in my great-grandmother’s farmyard died that summer, parched and brittle, and ready to release its hold on a particular patch of sodden existence and re-enter the boundless realm of divine immensities.

I was registered that summer for a Wilderness Camp, a week-long off-trail backpacking trip, in which six high schoolers would join two Episcopal priests in what was designed to be an eco-pilgrimage. We should probably have cancelled, given the extreme heat, but we didn’t. We lived to tell the story.

We began atop Mt. Magazine in west central Arkansas, the highest point between the Rockies and Appalachians, and wound our way down into the river valley below. By the third day, when the patina of excitement was dulled by the stultified march in triple-digit heat, our leader Fr. Arnold, who split his time as parish priest and US Park Service ranger, cheered us on that the creek ahead would be an oasis, where we would find rest and a refilling station for our water bottles, now depleted of their restorative powers.

He had made the same trip a month earlier, to plot the course, only now, in the throes of the heat wave, that watershed was bone dry, as was the next one, and the next.

He consulted his topographical map, plotting a new azimuth toward a deeper ravine where surely there would be running water. We set out for that, off course, but good steerage, and found a gentle brook there, where we filled our bottles, dropped the iodine tablets in, and began the hourlong wait, when it would be safe to drink.

We removed our boots and socks, dipping feet in the cool water, but had been there scarcely five minutes before two men with shotguns approached us warily. Fr. Arnold sought to explain our circumstances, and his priestly benevolence, but they were unpersuaded—we were trespassing, on private property, and we must leave immediately under threat of violence.

They let us keep our water bottles, thank goodness, so we could assuage our thirst, and we found safer pasture later that day.

Three days later we made it to our destination, a Benedictine abbey perched on a knoll in the river valley, where we would spend a final night, in retreat house beds. We were greeted warmly by a monk who invited us to shower and then reconvene outside, behind the retreat house, under a stand of trees.

It was there, on a hot summer afternoon, in the shade of those trees and the great abbey church towering behind us, and the monastic cemetery just off to our right, that the brother brought us an ice-cold watermelon—as sure a sacrament of hospitality and grace as I have ever tasted. A sacred gift to slake our thirst.

*Sir, give me this living water that I may never be thirsty again…*

This story of Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well is a remarkable one, a favorite of mine, known for its length—Jesus talks longer to this woman than anyone else in all the gospels. And he does so in the bright light of midday, when she comes to draw water, separate from the others, an outsider—this is where Jesus shows up for her. Just as he appeared to Nicodemus last week, in the nighttime of disillusion, down a dark alley of anonymity, because that is where Nicodemus was ready to see Jesus. Only Jesus knows Nicodemus. He knows the Samaritan woman. He knows each of us.

And the invitation repeats for you and me—where might you find Jesus waiting for you, ready to have a conversation? He will be there, anticipating your arrival, knowing you already, ready to offer you living water.

It’s been an interesting week, to say the least. And for those of us who are inclined to think that we can only get a glimpse of Jesus in a church building, beloved as it might be for many of us, this gospel passage invites us to reconsider that restrictive notion, and look for Jesus to be sitting at some well in your harried life, or some dark alley of your fear or confusion, he’s there, he’s waiting to have that conversation, he’s waiting to drink in what you have to offer him, and he’s ready to offer you living water.

The truth is, my friends, I’ve been pondering a lot of things in recent days, and reading, and praying. How do we do this—this communal gathering without really gathering in one place? How do we communicate with one another, and with the sacramental presence of Jesus, without sharing bread and wine?

I believe our sacramental theology is clear, folks, and we need not limit Jesus showing up, or nourishing us, only when we can taste a bit of bread, or drink a sip of wine in a church. We do these things, because we know we need them, and it is right to miss them, and long for them. The time will come when we will be together again, and I hope it will come again soon, sharing the meal fully and abundantly.

Our sacramental theology speaks of “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace” (BCP, pg. 857). So bread and wine, and baptismal waters, are outward signs of the inward and spiritual grace to be received.

But we need not limit the gift of divine grace to these two Great Sacraments, even if they are our central to our identity and practice. We hold in our tradition, stretching back centuries, that if for some reason one cannot consume bread or wine, for reasons of illness or disability, and I would extrapolate to quarantine for the common good, that one’s prayerful assent and participation in the Eucharist, even from a distance, is sufficient to experience the mediation of God’s gift of sacramental grace to you.

With that in mind, we’ve included in the service leaflet for today, available by clicking on the link just above the livestream window—we’ve included there prayers for you to say during the Distribution of Communion here, if you are so inclined.

The other thing we are very clear about as Anglicans is that we need not limit divine grace to church buildings or sacramental rites in them. As the Catechism says on page 861 of the Book of Common Prayer, expressed in rabbical form of a question:

“Is God’s activity limited to these rites?”

And the answer provided: “God does not limit [Godself} to these rites; they are patterns of countless ways by which God uses material things to reach out to us.”

Outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, blessed for your benefit, ready to be given and received. Living water shared on the lip of a well at high noon. Watermelon next to an abbey graveyard. A meal your family may share today.

So look for the outward and visible signs of spiritual grace waiting to surprise you, and bless you, and nourish you. Common things made holy, for your spiritual benefit.

And look for Jesus who awaits the conversation you are longing to have, the sort that stills your soul and clarifies meaning in life.

He will speak truth to you, life-giving truth, if you are ready to listen.

***John 4:5-42*** *[Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.” Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”]*

1. Image is “Woman at the Well” by my good friend, Delda Skinner, an artist from Austin, Texas. <http://www.ecva.org/exhibition/VPPreview/artists3/skinner4.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)