

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

As I spent time with these texts this week, in the midst of the significant fear that renewed war brings, I was struck by the question that the Israelites asked Moses. They were journeying in the wilderness, set free from Pharaoh through God's claim on them, but now without a home, without power, and without surety.

They looked at the desert around them, at their lack of resources and quarreled with Moses. They were thirsty. They were desperate. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" And then the real question they are asking... "Is the LORD among us or not?"

As I listened to these stories and I thought about where we are, it occurred to me that 6 years ago, many of us **didn't** hear these stories the way we expected. Six years ago, the third Sunday of Lent was March 15, 2020, and was, for many of us, the first of many Sundays that we could not gather for worship. We're off by a lectionary week, but that means that six years ago today was the last "pre-COVID" Sunday. In Maryland, everything was shut down on Monday afternoon. We had heard the story of Nicodemus and God loving the world – in my last congregation I had baptized a baby – and then we entered our an unprecedented wilderness.

We were using Sanctified Arts materials and the theme of that particular Lent was, providentially, "Wilderness" and I remember trying to figure out how we were going to navigate that desert that precluded us being together. We didn't have the resources to do outside worship, so we were limited to an online offering of me preaching to a camera for what I naively imagined would be an "extended Lent." It turned into such a long journey – basically a year of no in-person worship, and I know there were moments when I was asking that same question as the Israelites, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

It didn't feel like it.

It wasn't without hope. We learned things about how to create community through zoom and social media. But we also learned, I think, that being together matters. That we are a community more fully able to see and hear the promise of God when we can be in the same space together – to talk face to face, to offer a hug or a handshake.

That's not to say that those of us who are worshipping online are **not** part of our community, and I will be forever grateful that COVID pushed the church to use technology to build bridges that weren't there before. Screen-mediate worship is also worship, but we can't lose the connection that we make when we are together worshipping our God who

came “in the flesh.” Sometimes it takes a one-on-one conversation to truly connect with another human being.

It’s part of what scares me so deeply when I think of the state of the world today. Our news, our knowledge, our interactions have become so mediated by technology that I fear we’re losing the ability to engage with one another as we so desperately need. We’re losing the recognition that this world is made of **actual people**.

I remember pretty clearly the simplicity with which I viewed Iran in my childhood. I was 7 years old when the hostages were taken and the news was filled with chants of “death to America” in Arabic, by strangely dressed people of color who I lumped together as one mindset. That collective hated me and my community...and my God.

It took lots of work to learn that they were no more monolithically evil than Smalltown, USA – or Bigcity, USA. They’re more like us than we’d like to believe – or than certain news media would want us to know. I still don’t know much about the history and culture of Iran, but I’ve learned enough about the diversity of this world to see them as people created in the image of the same God who made me.

I just finished reading a book called, “The People’s Library” by Veronica Henry. It was set in the not-too-distant future, in the thriving city of Cleveland that led the US out of vaguely described time of intense societal turmoil. AI was becoming ubiquitous and near the end of the story, an AI character says this,

“...humans are very good at hurting each other and themselves. It’s as if they crave it so that they can then treat it with their excesses. Little about them has changed in that regard since my earliest records. Yet they also need each other. With an almost admirable desperation. Even the ones who won’t admit it. They are essentially social creatures.”

Sometimes it takes a fake person in a work of fiction to speak the truth.

The narrative so prevalent in our culture today is about the rugged individualism that supposedly built this country – spoiler alert, it didn’t – and that we succeed when individual liberty and autonomy is centered at the expense of the community. Our elected leaders tout a message of “peace through strength” that flies in the face of the good of the community and how much we depend on each other. Not just to survive but to thrive, to live our best abundant life.

And into all that mess – through the walls we build and the lines we draw on maps, Jesus walks to a well.

Journeying from Jerusalem to Galilee for a Judean Jew meant traveling on the east side of the Jordan river to avoid traveling through the territory of those they despised, the Samaritan Jews. But not Jesus. Verse 4 says that Jesus “had to go through Samaria”. He **had** to go through Samaria so that he could have an in-the-flesh encounter with a woman who needed to hear that she was loved – despite the boundaries that had been drawn.

Generations of misogyny and patriarchy tell us this woman was ostracized because she had a few too many husbands than is proper. Before you judge her as promiscuous, keep in mind that a woman of her day had virtually no power. She wouldn’t have had the **choice** to divorce husband after husband to earn our disdain. It’s much more likely that she had been **discarded** by husband after husband, perhaps for being barren – which made her even more alone and isolated in a society that emphasized family. **Community** mattered more than the individual and she seems to have been discarded.

But she is not discarded. She is a person with a life story. She is the reason Jesus comes to Samaria. She matters. She, a Samaritan woman, was seen by a Judean Rabbi and the barriers fall. She asks questions because she wants to understand this person who was supposed to be an enemy. Jesus answers and teaches as they learn about one another and learn the fundamental truth of God at work in the world. Person to person they learn.

The lines on the map don’t matter anymore as God’s Messiah – unexpected and misunderstood – builds community where there had been conflict. God erases a line that people had drawn so that all would experience the truth of the Messiah being born into the world. God, in the flesh, comes into the wilderness – to the well – to quench the thirst of those who are desperate and be living water for those who are dying.

People die when we build walls of hate and drop bombs rather than have conversations and learn each other’s stories. People die when we lose ourselves into the myth of individuality when God made us to be in community.

People live when we gather at the well with Jesus and learn that we are the same – in all the ways that matter. We are siblings. We are all children of God. Amen.