

## **Our Asks and God's Promise**

Third Sunday in Lent

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Gene McAfee

Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian

*"If you knew the gift of God..."* – John 4:10

Boy, what a week it's been.

Actually, what a year it has been.

We are living in one of those seasons when the news never seems to slow down. One crisis spills into the next. Missiles fly in the Middle East and we hear once again about bombing campaigns and retaliatory strikes, this time involving Iran. Families fleeing violence arrive at borders only to face detention, deportation, or worse—sometimes even death along the way. Political arguments harden into hatred. And closer to home, many people feel anxious about the future of their jobs, their rights, and their families.

And all of this is happening as we mark **Women's History Month**, a time meant to remember the courage of women who pushed back—women, like the Samaritan woman at the well, who refused to accept that the world must remain the way it is. Their stories remind us that the struggle for dignity, equality, justice, and freedom has never been easy, and it is never finished.

In moments like this it is very easy for fear to take over. Or if fear sounds too strong to describe what many of us are experiencing right now, then let's call it anxiety. Ours might be called an anxious age, as so many ages before us have been. Once upon a time, many thousands of years ago, our anxiety was grounded in the natural world: what beast might attack us, what natural disaster might overtake us, what disease might bring us suffering and death.

Today, our anxieties are often grounded in the social world that we began creating—what, six or seven or twelve or fourteen thousand years ago?—when the first humans began settling down from hunting and gathering into fixed abodes with agriculture and animal farming to support them and the development of the tools to make sedentary living possible. And when did we weaponize those tools, beating our plowshares into swords and our pruning hooks into spears? And when did we begin to

define our security by our ability to take from others what we needed or wanted? And when did we begin to call armed soldiers trained to kill “peacekeepers”?

So if you haven’t read them already, I refer you to the centering words in this morning’s order of service. Steinbeck wrote them in 1962, and he was talking about the rising tide of garbage that he and his dog Charley were driving through as they traversed what had once been a pristine landscape. We, rather than earthquakes or famine or wildfires, have become the greatest threat to the survival of our species. And that has been the case for most of human history.

And so there are reasons to be worried. Fear is one of the most powerful forces shaping human behavior. Fear can make nations lash out violently. Fear can make communities close their doors to strangers. Fear can make people cling to power or privilege at the expense of others. Fear can even make us forget who we are.

And that is exactly why the Bible speaks so often against fear.

Over and over again, God says to human beings: **“Do not be afraid.”**

It appears again and again throughout scripture—dozens of times. God knows what fear does to us. Fear hardens our hearts. Fear shrinks our imaginations. Fear clouds our judgment. Fear makes us believe that survival is the most important thing in our lives.

And from that fear we ask relief: relief from thirst, relief from hunger, relief from the threats posed by all manner of harms. Those are our chief asks.

But somewhere along the journey from early human to more human, we discovered that there is something even more important than survival. It’s called faith. Or to use the words attributed to Jesus in our lesson from John, “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 water that God provided in our first reading from Exodus slaked the thirst of the Israelites fearful of dying in the wilderness after having escaped slavery in Egypt. Their fear turned to anger, and they lashed out at Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

When thirst takes hold, panic is not far behind. The Israelites’ desperation became accusation.

*“Give us water to drink!”* they demanded.

It was not an unreasonable request. Water is life. But the deeper issue is not just thirst. The deeper issue is trust.

*“Is the Lord among us or not?”* they asked. Is our Creator, who redeemed us from bondage, also our Sustainer?

That question has echoed through every generation since.

When wars break out we ask, is God among us or not?

When migrants die searching for safety we ask, is God among us or not?

When women still struggle for an equal but different voice, and an equal but different dignity, we ask is God among us or not?

When governments weaponize the agencies and departments of public life we ask, is God among us or not?

The Israelites asked that question in the wilderness. And many people are asking it today.

But there are different kinds of questions, and the answers we get depend to a very great degree on the questions we ask. All researchers know this. Anyone who’s conducted a lab experiment or written a doctoral dissertation knows that what we put inside the frame of the question will determine what answers we’re able to provide. Or, as it’s so pithily put in the acronym beloved by computer scientists, GIGO – garbage in, garbage out.

That’s the way it is with much of our day-to-day, interactive life – we get out of it what we put into it.

But with God, it’s different. God often provides answers to questions that we haven’t even thought of asking. We want things for our material life, but God gives us what we need for eternal life—this life and the life to come. Or, to think of it in other terms, God provides for this short-lived life—our buying and selling, our loving and hating, our rising up and our lying down, our lying and our cheating—and God also provides for that life that lies beneath all of that quotidian flotsam and jetsam. Not just being itself—the reality that meets us on a daily basis—but the **Ground** of Being, as the theologian Paul Tillich called it, the reason there is being at all.

That’s the level of reality God is waiting for us to engage. That level is deep and it is wide. It is vast, in fact—much vaster than the mountains held sacred by the Samaritans and the Judeans in our lesson from John—and that’s the level where Jesus regularly engaged people. And that’s why people so often misunderstood him. Like the prophets

before him and with whom he was so closely identified, Jesus lived that abundant life he promised to anyone who would accept it—that abundant life going all the way back to Eden that we threw away in our disobedience.

Moses struck the rock at Horeb, and water flowed, and the Israelites were satisfied. But did they grasp what had just happened to and for them? Did they understand not only the meaning of filling their water skins, but also the deeper meaning of God providing for them in the midst of their fearful anger? Did they grasp that the divine presence, on which their very existence depended, had become manifest in their midst? Or did they say, “Yay, water!” and move on? As T. S. Eliot put it, did they have the experience but miss the meaning?

And that brings us to the Gospel reading.

Jesus is also tired and thirsty. He stops beside a well in Samaria and asks a woman for a drink.

Now that might not sound unusual to us, but it was extraordinary in that moment. Jews—that is, the residents of the Roman province of Judea—and Samaritans—that is, Jews of the region north of Judea called Samaria—they didn’t associate with each other. Each thought that they were the true people of God and that the other had gone astray. The Samaritan Jews were much stricter in their observance of Mosaic Judaism than the more accommodating Pharisaic Jews around Jerusalem. Religious tensions ran deep. Mutual hostility had become a toxic habit.

And beyond that, in that culture and in that age, men—especially religious teachers—did not typically engage in public conversation with women they did not know.

Yet Jesus does exactly that.

And in doing so, he breaks through several layers of division at once: ethnic division, religious division, and gender division.

Which makes this story particularly fitting during Women’s History Month.

Because the first person in the New Testament to share her belief in Jesus as God’s anointed one—the first messianic Christian evangelist, in other words—is not a rabbi, not a priest, not a political leader. It’s the Samaritan woman drawing water from a well.

Even before the astonished women return from the empty tomb on Easter morning, this unnamed woman—named St. Photina in the Eastern church—returns to her own people—her own outcast, maligned Samaritan people—with the question, “He cannot

be the Messiah, can he?” She’s connected the dots, and her life has been changed by her encounter with Jesus in ways she doesn’t even understand yet.

And Jesus tells her something astonishing.

*“If you knew the gift of God... **you** would have asked **him**, and he would have given you living water.”*

Like the Israelites in the desert, this woman is thinking about physical water. Wells. Buckets. The daily labor of survival.

But Jesus is pointing toward something deeper. Living water. A life grounded in the presence of God rather than the ethos of scarcity of the world.

And then something even more remarkable happens.

The woman undertakes the first Christian missionary journey in history.

She goes back to her community and tells people about the man she met at the well. She invites them to come and see for themselves. She invites others to come to Jesus. She is a true evangelical—she’s sharing the good news. And because of her witness, many Samaritans came to believe.

Which is a quiet but profound moment in the story of salvation.

The boundaries people thought were permanent—religious, ethnic, gendered—begin to dissolve.

God’s living water refuses to stay inside the containers we build, whether those containers be on a mountain in Samaria or in a temple in Jerusalem or in the pages of someone’s sacred writings.

That is one of the central messages of this story. Our asks for our short-lived life are so much smaller, so much shallower, so much less effective than God’s promise of abundant, eternal life.

Human beings love to build containers and ask that God protect them.

We build them around nationality.

Around religion.

Around race.

Around gender.

Around orientation.

Around who belongs and who does not.

We draw lines and say, "God is on this side," and that side, funnily enough, is always where we happen to be standing.

But Jesus says something very different to the woman at the well:

*"The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth."*

Dive deep, Jesus is saying to this woman with whom he has the single longest conversation in the Bible. Think outside the box, the box that is the container of your religion, your ethnicity, your history, even your specific past. Don't ask what **God** can do with those; ask instead how **you, with God's grace**, can use all of those to fulfill God's promise of abundant, eternal life for every single one of us, no exceptions.

God cannot be contained by our boundaries.

Not by mountains.

Not by temples.

Not by religions.

And certainly not by fear of the unknown or hatred of the other.

When nations go to war believing God is exclusively on their side, they forget that truth.

When immigrants are treated as threats instead of neighbors, we forget that truth.

When women's voices are dismissed or silenced, or when we listen to women's voices only when they mimic men's voices, we forget that truth.

And when fear leads us to protect ourselves rather than care for one another, we forget that truth.

But the good news of the Gospel is that God does not forget.

God continues to pour out living water for all who will receive it.

Water in the wilderness.

Grace at the well.

Hope where people expected only scarcity.

And that living water does something remarkable: it changes what we ask for.

At first we ask for survival.

Like the Israelites:

“Give us water.”

Like the Samaritan woman:

“Sir, give me this water so I won’t be thirsty.”

But as God’s grace works within us, our questions begin to change.

Instead of asking only how to survive, we begin asking how to live faithfully.

Instead of asking only how to protect ourselves, we begin asking how to care for each other.

Instead of asking who belongs, we begin asking how wide God’s mercy might be.

That is the transformation Jesus is offering.

Living water that does not merely satisfy thirst for a moment, but reshapes the whole of life.

And that is why we gather here in a world that often feels thirsty—thirsty for peace and hungry for righteousness. We have plenty of religion, but many of us are feeling starved for God. And so the ancient question arises yet again, Is God among us or not?

We come here to find the strength and courage to answer that searching question with a resounding “Yes!”

We come here to be reminded that the world is not all bombs and drones and strikes and retaliations.

We come here to shape for a time and to share for a lifetime that alternative reality that Jesus came preaching, the realm of God.

We do not come here to pretend that the world is safe or to forget how unsafe it is for millions.

The world was not safe for the Israelites in the desert, and it is not safe for the people of Israel today.

It was not safe for the Samaritan woman navigating social, sexual, and gender boundaries in her time and in her place, and it is not safe today for the millions of women and girls who live under the threat and reality of being ignored, exploited, trafficked, or assaulted.

And it is not safe for the people of Iran today, as we join in assassinating political leaders and further destabilizing an already fraught and violent region.

The world is unsafe in many places, and people are understandably afraid. But we come together in places like this because we believe in something deeper than fear.

We believe that God still provides water in the wilderness when we stop quarreling and fighting long enough to see that abundance.

We believe that Christ still meets people at the wells of their lives, those deep places where no rope of human weaving can reach, but where the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

And we believe that the living water of God's grace is still flowing—across borders, across traditions, across every barrier that we human beings build.

*“If you knew the gift of God...”*

That is the invitation Jesus offers.

To the Samaritan woman.

To the disciples.

And to us.

Because if we truly knew the gift of God—that abundant life of which death is not the end—we would know that fear does not have the decisive word, the determinative word, or the final word.

Grace does.

And that grace, like living water, is meant **for** all of us and is available **to** all of us, no exceptions. That is God's promise. We simply have to ask.

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