

WGUMC March 23, 2014 John 4:1-29 Lent 3

Here is the setting: I am a half-time pastor in Santa Cruz, studying for doctoral exams and diapering a baby. I have been back in the pulpit for six weeks since coming off maternity leave. My sermon on this day is written as a series of letters to the Apostle Paul reflecting on the events of the previous week. Listen to the conclusion of that sermon.

"Dear Paul, It's Saturday night. I get in the car at 10:38 p.m., exactly one week after Lynette called from Charlie's Hong Kong and said, "The church is on fire." I pull out of the driveway and in the rear-view mirror, my memory sees a pillar of black smoke against flame-tinted fog. Heading west, I relive it: my mechanical motions—shift, signal, turn, brake; getting bumped from behind at Seabright and not bothering to stop; the policeman who let me through the barricade; Nancy, the [homeless woman sleeping on the property and the] first

familiar face to greet me; stumbling my way up the sidewalk, stepping over fire hoses. I want to remember; I want to forget.

"Now I sit across the street, in front of the fire station and stare at what used to be a sanctuary, a safe place; now it's a safety hazard. Irony is everywhere. The building is dark, the air still heavy with ash.

"My head is heavy with the words: The hour is coming when we will worship not on this mountain or that one, when it doesn't matter if we worship in this building or no building. As long as we worship in spirit and in truth. But where is the spirit that burned in this place? Where is the truth that was kindled in this space? The checker at the party supply store said 'you must've been doin' somethin' right to have made the devil that mad!'

"I sit with these questions and listen to sounds of life in the night. Cars whizzing by; they've seen it all now and no longer slow at the corner of Cayuga. Bicyclers pedal past fast.

People out walking. A homeless man carries a plastic bucket of flowers. A couple of young guys carry a bottle of beer. And I think, maybe the Spirit is at work out here and not trapped in there. Maybe the truth is in how well we live in this community and not how long we maintain a piece of property. Maybe we best worship when and where we work to love and care for all these people.

"Now I see dimly and my prayer comes haltingly. Paul, please pray with me. I am thirsty: for rest from my worry, peace for my memory, wisdom for my ministry, strength for my journey. The well is deep but I have no bucket. Lord, let me borrow yours. The road is long and I don't know where I'm going. Oh Lord, lead the way. My heart is open but the hurt is real. God, be sure to mend me before you send me. The task is too much for any of us, but your grace is sufficient for all of us. Lord, have mercy on us. Amen."

After hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of buckets of water had been poured out on that fire, there I was one week later sitting in the dark on a bench across from a burned-out building, reliving the memory and realizing that I was reliving someone's story. I was sitting by the well. It was very deep. I had no bucket. And I was very thirsty.

The story of the Samaritan woman continues to have incredible power for me, because it connects me to a place and a time in my life when I was utterly dependent on the grace of God and the gift of Living Water.

So I ask you: has there ever been a time in your life when you have lived this story? Have you ever been in a situation where the stress was so great and your thirst was so strong that you became the Samaritan woman at the well?

Oh, I can imagine any of us arriving with our water jar. We're weary because it's heavy and it's heavy because it isn't really empty, is it? It doesn't have any water, but maybe it's

full of little pieces of pain, the pain that we carry in our body, mind or spirit. The pain is chronic or it is intermittent, but it is never entirely absent. Anyway, it takes its toll on us, doesn't it?

Or maybe our jar is full of the shards from broken relationships, broken promises, and broken dreams. Like Humpty Dumpty we couldn't put them back together again, but we carry them around anyway so that they can remind us or so that they can keep hurting us.

Or maybe our jar contains hefty rocks, the rocks of our resistance. All the "yes but's" whenever someone presents us with a new challenge, whenever the situation calls for us to make a change or God demands that we make a confession. These rocks are heavy and they are our only defense against the threat of our own transformation.

Whatever else we are carrying around with us, I'm sure there are also many fragments of fear in there: fear of losing

our job, not being able to pay rent, fear for our children and their future, fear of going to the doctor, fear of getting old and dying alone. On top of that, everything we own and everyone we know comes to us with fears attached, and they take up a lot of room in our jar.

So, by the time we get to the well, our jar is already full. In fact, there's no room for the water. So we sit down and wait and wonder, "What do we do now?" We could dump the jar, but our whole lives are in there. If we emptied it, we would be empty. Who knows? We might even disappear. We could go to town and buy another jar, but there would be no way we could carry both of them. So we sit there, just waiting, contemplating.

As time goes by, a stranger walks up, also looking tired and thirsty. He looks at our jar full of our junk. He sees it all and knows that we have no water and no way to carry it. Still he asks us for a drink.

Here, we come to an interlude: I told the Bible study on Thursday night that I was preaching on the woman at the well but I was feeling pretty thirsty myself. I had been trying to write the devotional all week and was running on empty. Friday, I took a break from writing and rode my bike to church for a meeting.

While I was coming into the breezeway, a woman was coming up the walk. She couldn't hear and she couldn't talk. So she motioned to me for paper and a pen. I got some from the kitchen and she sat on the back step and wrote a note to me. She needed money for food and for laundry. I wrote back that I would see what I could do. Then she motioned to me that she was thirsty. I brought her a can of soda, while I went to get her a grocery card and a little cash.

When I came back out, she was scratching her arms. There were small red bites all over them. She wrote that she had had to throw out her clothes because of the lice. And I

realized that when you are living on the street, there is no practical way to get rid of those little buggers. Looking her in the eye, I put my hands together in prayer and bowed my head, trusting that the Spirit would intercede for me with sighs too deep for words. [Romans 8:26] When I looked up, she was signing something. All I caught was the word "love."

As I watched her walk away, I thought, here is the Bible come to life again! Here is the woman at the well! But what did I give her? A can of soda is not living water. And in my brief encounter, I could not fill up her jar. But I know someone who can, and I have some reason to hope that she does, too. At least she knows his name (Love).

Now let's go back to the well. The Samaritan woman who asked Jesus to give her living water, never let down her bucket, never took a drink. And after speaking with Jesus, she left her jar at the well and went into the town to tell everyone about

the Messiah. I guess she didn't need her jar anymore because she became one.

Jesus filled her up with Living Water so that she could leave her jar of junk and go fill someone else. Sometimes the only way to fill your jar is to go empty yourself into someone else's need.

If you read your weekly email or if you check out the upcoming Willow Word, you can read about the Willow Glen Care Team. They've been quietly meeting for about a year and working out ways to help others feel more connected to their church community. If folks can't personally come to the well, the Care Team will bring them some living water. They have taken over from Ruby the task of getting sermon copies to some of our shut-ins. They are making phone calls and visiting. They are assessing needs and identifying resources and they need your help. Our goal is to not let anyone get too lonely or too thirsty. Because we've all been the Samaritan woman at

the well at one time or other. So what will *you* do the next time someone asks you for a drink?