

**“Living Water Flows Where it Will” based on John 4:4-30, Exodus 17:1-7**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 12, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Once upon a time, Josephine was playing with a plastic syringe. No, not the needle kind, but the kind you put in liquid children’s Tylenol or ibuprofen to measure out up to 5 milliliters. Then she put the syringe in the toilet. Then, the toilet was flushed. It disappeared. Soon after, as you might expect, the toilet clogged – and it backed up. Fortunately, it didn’t overflow, as close as it had been, and I was able to call a friend to come and snake the toilet. That’s the thing about running water, if its blocked, it doesn’t stop – it continues to flow somewhere.

After that incident, we noticed that when we let the water out of the bathtub, the toilet would start bubbling, with water seeming to spring up and gurgle. It was strange, but it was fine and no one we told seemed too concerned about it. This was back in New Jersey, and everything seemed ok other than that. That is, until we saw some drops appearing on the ceiling downstairs. That’s the thing about running water, it goes where it goes, everywhere. And even when something is in the way, it still flows.

So, we called a full-fledged, licensed, equipped, fully resourced plumber in at this point. He took the toilet off and it was what we feared – the source of the ceiling water. That little syringe was somewhere deep in the pipes, letting some water past it, but if there was too much, it didn’t matter to the water – it kept going. That’s what running water does. It just keeps on going. It can be obstructed, but will find its path, no matter what is in its way. What does any of that have to do with our scripture? Well let me give some background.

In the ancient world, when covenants were made between two people or two nations, often the gods they worshiped would be invoked as guarantors and witnesses to it. But unique among their peers, the people of Israel had a covenant with their God. This God promised his people would be a light to all nations, and further, and it was God who made the covenant under the penalty of death. So, God provided Abraham, who 100, and Sarah, who was 90, with a son, Isaac. When Isaac was old enough to marry, his wife was found at a well.

And so, Isaac and Rebecca had two sons, Jacob and Esau, and God promised favor to Jacob. But Jacob didn’t trust God’s promise, so he took Esau’s blessing from their father Isaac, and had to run, spending decades away from home, but God provided for him. Like his father, Jacob found his wife, a shepherd named Rachel, at a well.

She was his beloved, but he was tricked into marrying her sister too. And so, it was not until he already had nine sons, when Rachel, finally bore him a son, who was named Joseph. After Joseph was born, Jacob decided it was to reconcile with Esau, but before the night before he could go, Jacob was hurt wrestling with God. Humbled, God gave Jacob another name – Israel. This would become the name of his descendants.

Joseph was Jacob’s favorite, so his brothers didn’t like him very much, but they stopped short of killing him, and shipped him off to Egypt where he was enslaved but rose to great power there. Second only to the Pharaoh, when famine hit and his family sought help in Egypt, he was there to help them, so he received them and forgave them. While in Egypt, Joseph married an

Egyptian woman and had two sons. Jacob gave Joseph a double share of his inheritance – a privilege that by custom went to the first-born son and so, Ephraim and Manasseh became full heirs. These boys were Israelite and Egyptian – children of Abraham and the world.

Eventually, the descendants of Jacob lost favor in Egypt and were enslaved by the Pharaoh. And so Moses, a descendant of Levi, one of Joseph's older brothers, encountered God, and learned that God's name was "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." The Lord told Moses to lead the people out, and Moses did that, narrowly escaping Pharaoh through the waters of the Red Sea, which God had parted for all of Israel to pass through.

Still, just a few weeks later, the people were upset. They fight with Moses and tested God, and God gave them water to drink. This was our reading this morning. They were thirsty and in the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula, and it's surely understandable, that they had concerns about being free of Egypt, now only to die in the desert. Still, their fear was whether the God who saved them, had now abandoned them.

This theme repeats itself over and over again in the story of this people. Yet, God makes another covenant with them and this one is different. It's a two-way agreement – "you follow my law, you will thrive." But the first agreement remained as God had promised, that the Lord would never leave Abraham's children, and that they bring light to all the nations.

Eventually, the people get back to the land where Jacob and Esau had been, the promised land. Each tribe received a segment of the land, but with God they continued the pattern – they'd forget God, be saved by God, then remember God. They were sick of it. So, they decide they want to be like the nations and ask for a King – and get Saul, who shows them the mistakes kings make, and then God sends David who unites them and makes Jerusalem the nation's capital.

God promises David's kids will rule Israel forever. And the first successor, Solomon, builds the temple. But Solomon's son, David's grandson, Rehoboam messes everything up. He becomes an authoritarian and enslaves his own people. The 10 Northern Tribes say goodbye and form their own nation, taking the name Israel. Among them are the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim, from Joseph's two sons. So, these are people who share both Egyptian and Israelite heritage. Eventually, neither Israel nor the Southern Kingdom of Judah, starting with their kings, would be faithful to the covenant made with Moses, as they fell into idol worship.

First many from Israel were taken into exile by the Assyrian Empire. Babylon defeats Assyria, then takes many from Judah into exile. Then Persia conquers Babylon, and the people of Judah return, but those taken from the Northern Kingdom's 10 tribes of Israel never return. This summary of much of the Hebrew bible, shows a story of separation and division, and it is the backdrop of our gospel reading because Samaria is made up primarily of the land of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh where the upper class and rulers were taken away, but many of the people were left and married non-Israelite locals and exiles of other parts of Babylon's empire.

As we talked about last week with Nicodemus, in that time, your family history was everything. It determined much of who you were, including your god and your religious practices. So, where many pastors might have wisely let you off the hook on all of this, and just said, "the

Samaritans were hated," I wanted you to see in depth the conflict of generations in scripture that went into this separation. And so, the Samaritans retained the five books of Moses, but edited to dismiss Jerusalem and its temple. They rejected anything other than the five books – the prophets and writings. They claimed they alone preserved the true worship of Israel's God. And so, when Jesus goes to the well, he enters a deep rivalry, between the Jewish people, who believed they were especially chosen with overlapping covenants, and their separated family members, who were both Israelite and Gentile too. And so, Jesus is leaving Judea in our text today, the land of Judah, and is going back to Galilee, which despite being farther north a diverse area with a large, loyal Jewish population, even if they were known for a funny accent. Samaria and its cities are in between the two, but there are plenty of routes to go from Judea to Galilee and avoid any contact with Samaritans.

Yet, our text says it was necessary for Jesus to go through Samaria to get to Galilee. It was not geographically necessary, but theologically necessary because that route ties to his message to Nicodemus. You see, Jesus said, "God so loved the world," and now for his disciples, Jesus decides to show them what he means when he said, "the world." And so, Jesus goes to the enemies of his Jewish Galilean apostles, to a city with people who hate Jews from north and south, whom the Jews also hate for their heresies, and impure, gentile infused, ancestry.

And so, Jesus goes to the well of Jacob, who is common ancestor of Samaritans and Jews. He goes to the Samaritans and goes to a woman, who like Jesus's and David's ancestors, is someone who was likely judged as unworthy of his presence on multiple levels.

I believe this scene at the well is meant to remind us of marriage, of Israel coming together. Jesus is reconciling the people of Judea and Samaria, by reinterpreting the story of Israel, by pointing to the way Isaac found his wife, Rebecca, when his servant prayed that the one who offers him water will be the wife chosen by God. So, Jesus does not wait for her to offer a drink but asks her for a drink.

What really excited me here was the parallel with Rachel, because she is working as a shepherd for her father and brings the flock at the hottest part of the day. And there Jacob rolls the stone away to let the water out for her sheep, and she kissed him. He wept.

Sure, we've all heard sermons about how the woman was there midday to avoid gossipers, and perhaps she was, but also Rachel went midday to find the crowds to get the water, even though Jacob, as she approaches, says it is the wrong time of day for water. It's no coincidence that Jesus and the Samaritan woman then talk marriage, since ultimately intermarriage was why the Jews returning from exile in the book of Ezra, questioned Samaritan faith and heritage, and rejected them and their help in rebuilding the temple.

And so, Jesus is talking with the woman at the well about her five marriages, and that she is not married to her current man. This may not be her fault. We don't know her story. Some ancients speculated she unfairly judged. But Jesus does know her story, and he does not judge her, just as he knows the Samaritan story and doesn't judge them. He continues talking with her, bringing her closer.

He tells her that he has “living water,” another beautiful double meaning in John, because much like the phrase born from above, which can also mean born again, from the story previously with Nicodemus. In Hebrew and Greek, moving water was not referred to as “running water,” as we would say in our culture, but “living water.” So, she takes him literally and questions his source for this water, but he says the running water he has will never let you be thirsty, and will flow up as a fountain, springing out eternal life.

And so, she gets all theological, and she questions – Are we supposed to worship like you all in Jerusalem, or do we worship on my Mount Gerizim? This might be like meeting Jesus today and asking about do you baptize infants, or do you only baptize believers. And Jesus responds by saying the Father will soon be worshiped in Spirit and Truth.

I don’t think she understands that answer, because she says, “When the Messiah comes he will sort this out.” Jesus responds with another fabulous two-meaning phrase – “I am. The one speaking to you.” In Greek, “I am” is ego emi, and it can certainly be “I am he” or “It is I,” and that’s a fine translation. But in the way John uses it throughout his gospel, I agree with scholars who say it is a shorthand also, pointing to the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, meant to represent, God’s name in Hebrew, “I am who I am.”

So then, John reveals to us that Jesus also speaks that he is the Lord. He is greater than Jacob who dug the well – He is God. She runs off asking if he could be just the Messiah, if he could be the Christ and people listen. They leave the city to find him.

My sisters and brothers, there is a lot here, I know, but here is the bottom line for today. The story of scripture is one of separation caused by sin, and reconciliation in Christ. It is the story of God’s people being divided from each other and from God, until God became human, sending the Son to share in our humanity, to be the meeting place of heaven and earth, the true temple, and the light to all nations, fulfilling the covenants, living in our limits, yet sinless and rejected by the world. He was nailed to that cross to die, yes, but sin failed. He died for us. But then he rose for us. By this, the Spirit is in and among us, so that we can join Christ in reconciling the world, in him and to him.

All of scripture points to him, the running water flowing from Genesis to Revelation, and it brings life and cannot be stopped – the living water goes where it goes. It can be obstructed, just as we saw in the separation of Israel from Judah, the separation of the Jews from the Samaritans, but the water cannot be stopped. Jesus shows the disciples who he meant in saying God loved the world. He goes to redeem those the disciples thought were enemies.

Friends, in the story of God’s people, a lot of syringes have been thrown into the toilets. Waste that should have been washed away, was backed up, and it festered. God’s people fought, they quarreled, and they tested God because of it. But God’s promise to Abraham remains fulfilled in Christ and carried forward by all those who are children of Abraham, now part of his family, and part of God’s own family by faith. The people of Israel questioned God’s presence, and in the world which we look out upon, it’s easy for us to do that too.

Here's the thing: You and I, all of us, yes, we are all two-year-old Josephine at times. We all throw debris in the way of God's moving water, and it clogs things up. It's not just us, but Christians have been doing this for almost 2,000 years. But let me assure that you are loved and God's water continues to press forward. It may go places you don't understand but it is always pushing to find you.

Beloved, the Spirit is with us to empower us to stand with Christ and to get out those roto-rooters needed to clear the pipes and make amends. We are called to be part of the reconciliation to which we are called. There is no shortage of blockages, preventing us from reconciling, causing us to separate. Many are personal. Many are systemic. Many were and still are justified by bad theology, but God's redemptive plan is to push through or get around them.

What's both amazing and puzzling to me because of our flaws, is that we can be part of this. God wants us to accept the love poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit and use that love by sharing it in God's work to redeem this world. So, let's do that. Let's clear the path and play our part in reconciling this world to Christ. Amen.