

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Can I begin by commending you on the social distance which you're keeping between each other, which actually isn't that hard at this service. As you know, we're here at St. James and we're following all the guidelines we've been given. We get guidelines from the diocese and from the CDC, and we're going to keep following them as closely as we can. So we appreciate you being with us under these very odd circumstances, and we'll carry on worshipping, following the guidelines and keeping the common sense principles that we all know so well. So back to those readings, both the Old Testament reading and the gospel reading involve thirsty people. In the Exodus passage from the Old Testament, people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And in the gospel reading from St. John, Jesus introduces Himself to the Samaritan woman by saying, "Give me a drink." We're all thirsty people. We're all thirsty for something. I have a thirst for knowing precisely what is to be done about this coronavirus. I've had a very peculiar week because we all have been bombarded with different views about how we should react, how churches should react.

Much of it contradictory. I've been thirsting just for somebody to give me some sensible common sense advice. I have at times this week felt like the young boy in the rectory who one Sunday, just it all got too much for him and he ran from the rectory and he was heard to run away shouting, "Germs and Jesus. Germs and Jesus. It's all I ever hear about and I've never seen either of them." We could be thirsty for any number of things. You might be thirsty for hope. I was interested in what St. Paul writes in the epistle, "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." Suffering and trials are an inevitable part of our life. Our true character is revealed in such times, that we're shaped by the trials that we face and how we respond to them. Suffering is never the last word, there is always hope. Moving on from the epistle, I want to focus on that great gospel reading from John chapter 4 and pick out a few things I noticed in the text.

It makes for an interesting comparison with the story we heard last week. If you were here last week, you'll have heard us talking about Jesus' encounter with the Pharisee, Nicodemus. That's one of the characteristics of John's gospel, Jesus meeting these people and having long dialogues with them. This one is similar in its lengths and in some ways, but in other ways it's very different. So Nicodemus, who was last week's subject was Jewish, this unnamed woman is a Samaritan. He was a powerful ruler, this woman was on the margins. Nicodemus came in secret and at night to speak with Jesus, Jesus meets this woman in a public place in the middle of the day. Nicodemus couldn't quite get what Jesus was saying. If you remember, it just didn't make sense to him. The penny didn't drop. But this woman does seem to get what Jesus is saying. In fact, is the first person in John's gospel to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Two very different people that Jesus meets, but their needs are presented in different ways.

To Nicodemus, Jesus offered the promise of new birth. To the Samaritan woman, Jesus makes this promise of living water. Maybe just set the scene a bit behind what's going on behind this encounter. Jesus and His disciples are going from the South to the North, from Judea to Galilee, which means they have to go through Samaria. The thing about Samaria is that it was full of Samaritans and the Jews didn't get on with the Samaritans, and there was a 400 year feud going on between these two people. Jesus stops at a well known well, Jacob's Well. It's still there, it can still be visited. About half a mile from the town of Sychar and Jesus was tired. It was hot. It was mid day and Jesus is there left on His own because the disciples have gone into the town to get lunch, but Jesus isn't on His own for long because this Samaritan woman comes to get water at the well where He's sitting. Now, you have to wonder why she's there. There were wells in the town, she's walked on her own in the heat of the day. There must be a reason.

She's social distancing, but not because of a virus. We find out as the story progresses that she's got this complicated domestic arrangement. It's reasonable to suppose that this woman is something of an outcast on the margins of the community, and she simply likes to keep herself to herself. Anyway, she's probably surprised to find somebody else at the well.

She's gone there because she thinks she'll be on her own, especially when she finds out it's a Jewish man and she no doubt feels awkward when this Jewish man opens up a conversation with her, because Jewish men don't talk to Samaritan women. They don't talk to Jewish women barely, let alone Samaritan women. She's probably thinking, "This is awkward. I'll just get some water and go." But it wasn't that simple. Jesus takes the initiative and speaks to her. He makes a request and in doing so, in reaching out, He breaks down all the barriers that exist between the two of them. Between Jews and Samaritans, between male and female. Jesus is still in the business of reaching out to us and breaking down barriers.

If we feel there are barriers between us and God, well, God didn't put them there. "God proved His love for us." St. Paul said in that reading, "That while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We have been justified by His blood. We were reconciled to God through the death of His Son." Through Jesus Christ, we have received reconciliation with God. God in Christ has done all that needs to be done to bring us peace with God. We are reconciled with Him. If there's something unreconciled between us and God, then it's on our side, not God's. God is always there to take the initiative with us. He makes the first move, the call upon us is always to respond to God's initiative. Another thing I noticed in this passage was the offer of living water, which actually if you start to think about it, is a bit odd. What is living water? I found it helpful to think about the opposite. I know, well, I have a sense of what the opposite is. If Jesus is talking about living water, perhaps the opposite is stagnant water.

That's a concept I can get my head around. I think we all know what stagnant water is like both literally and metaphorically. We all have perhaps in our lives, those stagnant pools that we go back to, to drink from that we know don't do us any good, but they're familiar. There's a strange attraction. I'd like to suggest that our news coverage at the moment is becoming something of a pool of stagnant water. I've been part of an email train that throughout the week has just gotten more and more hysterical as people in on the train get caught up in the conversation about the coronavirus, and at the end of the week I

thought, "I need to stop reading. This is a stagnant pool that's not doing me any good." So let's find a news outlet we trust. Just check it occasionally to see if there's been any big changes. We all know what the advice is. As I've said, you're practicing it beautifully in church this morning.

Of course, we need to be sensible and follow precautions as we are trying to do here at St. James, but we don't need to be drinking from a stagnant pool of incessant hysteria. In faith, let's seek to retreat to a quiet place and treat the coming weeks, which we know will be different, let's treat them as a time of Sabbath, a time to withdraw. A gift. Yes, we need to be concerned for the week and those on the margins who are always hit hardest in a time of crisis. And this coming week, that's what I'll be turning my mind to doing, to listening to people and seeing what we at St. James can do to help the weak and the marginalized amongst us and around us. But in the meantime, let's do what we can to slow down, to rest, to enjoy the empty spaces in our diary. Let's do something that we've always said we didn't have time to do, we have the time now.

It's been opened up and given to us. Let's pop in to see a neighbor we've never seen before just to check how they are, if they're elderly, to see if we can get anything from the store for them. Let's seek out the opportunities presented to us by a time of crisis. Let's drink in the living water that Jesus brings. Let's take a long, slow, leisurely drink of the living waters that Jesus offers. Let's say with the Samaritan woman, "Jesus, give me this water." The Samaritan woman in this story is much better able to grasp what Jesus is saying than the Nicodemus character we were thinking about last week. He couldn't move beyond the literal level. "How can we be born again?" You might remember him saying, but this woman gets what Jesus is saying. When Jesus says to her, "The water that I will give you will become a spring of living water gushing up to eternal life." She doesn't say, as Nicodemus might've said, "Well, how is that water going to get inside of me?" She simply says, "Give me this water." So St. Paul knew what it was to have this water.

He had that experience of drinking on Jesus' living water. He describes it thus in our epistle, "God's love

has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Jesus talked of gushing, St. Paul talks of pouring. The point is the same. We're not to be reservoirs of God's love, we're to be streams. The love that flows into us is to flow out. I've got one final observation to make about this story. When the Samaritan woman understood that Jesus might be the long awaited Messiah, we're told that she left her water jar and went back to the city. Perhaps the left behind water jar can become a metaphor for us of the things that we need to leave behind if we're to fully embrace the strangeness of the times that lie ahead of us. What do we need to leave behind in our lives? The things that we drink from but which never bring refreshment, that never slake our thirst. What needs to be left behind?

We're all being called to leave things behind this week, let's seek to do that in a positive way and drink deeply from the wells of living water. Amen.