

“Your Understanding of God Is Just That”
Exodus 17:1-7
John 4:5-30, 39-42

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a pandemic. As of 7:00am this morning, there were 162,501 cases, 6,068 deaths and 75,968 who have recovered.¹ I’m sure the numbers are even higher now. Precaution and proactive hygiene are imperative. Practicing social distancing and not meeting in groups numbering more than ten is smart behavior. A recent NBC News/WSJ poll states that 60 percent believe worst is yet to come for U.S. in coronavirus pandemic.²

The pandemic and crowded grocery stores with emptied shelves is unsettling. I see panic motivated by fear. I have two questions. Does fear destabilize you? Does your understanding of God stabilize you? Or both. Although the people of God stumbled at Meribah and Massah, the truth gleaned from Exodus 17 is that God was with the people. Their question, like ours, was “Is the LORD among us or not?”³ Fear limits an awareness that God is in our midst. Faith banks one’s hope on God’s promise that God is always in our midst. As Christians, we know, whether our behavior is good or bad; circumstances a blessing or curse; fear taking a foothold in our thinking, that God is in our midst. Barbara Brown Taylor and Episcopal priest and the emerita Butman Professor of Religion at Piedmont, tells the following story:

By the following semester, word had gotten around that you could not pass Dr. Taylor’s class if you did not worship idols, but if anything that helped enrollment instead of hurting it. Students seem to be up for anything that promises to relieve the tedium of their education... That first field trip opened a whole folder of questions for me, both as a person and as a teacher of young persons. Is it better to read about a religion in a textbook than to risk actual contact with it? How would I feel if a group of students visited my church and treated the holiest things inside it like oddities? Can anyone who visits a sacred space remain an observer, or does one become a participant simply by entering in? Does the taking part in the ritual of another faith automatically make you a traitor to your

¹Stats taken from worldometer.com. Worldometer is run by an international team of developers, researchers, and volunteers with the goal of making world statistics available in a thought-provoking and time relevant format to a wide audience around the world. Worldometer is owned by Dadax, an independent company. Worldometer has no political, governmental, or corporate affiliation.

²NBC News release, Sunday, March 15, 2020.

³Exodus 17:7

own? The most troubling question of all was why my religion seemed so much less gracious than Dr. Acharya's religion did.... Her hospitality was impeccable. She welcomed all of us to join her at the high altar in her temple without asking what we believed. She enlisted the priest to offer special prayers for us. She did not distance herself from those who snickered... She opened her arms to us from beginning to end. If there were any problems with the visit, they came from the religious worldview of her guests, who had been taught to be very careful about who and what they embraced... Why was my crowd so defensive? Who had convinced us that faith was a competitive sport and that only one team could win for all eternity? With an attitude like that, who could blame a neighbor for sensing that Christian love was mostly charitable condescension?⁴

The texts in Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:5-42 reveal to us that God is a source that satisfies and stabilizes. God is all knowing. God is empathetic. God is relational. God is present at all times and in an unconditional loving way. Everything that happens in our life is a gift from God. The good, the bad and the ugly is the way we discover how God is shaping us into amazing people. And we experience this shaping through warm relationships, relationships that make a difference. In such a time as this pandemic, people, religious and non-religious, are looking for answers and hope. Your understanding of God is just that... yours.

John 4:5-22 describes a scandalous scene. Jesus went to a place that Jews were forbidden to go and spoke to a woman, a Samaritan woman, and an adulterer at that. The Samaritan woman was going about her daily business drawing water. It was noon. Noon was not the normal time to fetch water. And before the Samaritan woman knew it, Jesus entered into the messiness of her life...no fear...only faith and love... For Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but 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 (the thirsty) a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."⁵ Oh, the Samaritan woman didn't get it until Jesus revealed that she had been married five times and the current man she was with was not her husband. Jesus was in her space to give her new life; to know that she was loved regardless. The Samaritan woman after listening to Jesus

⁴Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy* (New York, New York: HarperOne, 2019), 43-44.

⁵John 4:13-14

lovingly expose her life said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”⁶ The Samaritan woman received new life that day. And so can you.⁷

Today is The Third Sunday in Lent. Lent is a time for us to take seriously what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Through authentic self-reflection, we are assured in what we believe about God and that we belong to God and one another. And, we’re not to be intimidated or threatened by what others believe. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor, the author of *Holy Envy* writes, “It was not the first time I felt shame about an aspect of my faith—or envy of an aspect of someone else’s—but it was the most acute. What else was I going to notice about my own religious home as I visited the homes of others?”⁸ Authentic self-reflection, like that of the Samaritan woman, requires engagement between your spirit, God’s Spirit and truth.

Come to worship and receive comfort, guidance, inspiration and confidence. Come to worship and give your fears to God and receive faith from God. You belong to God. Come to worship expecting to be “saved” that is to be filled with a new attitude, purpose and way to live. God has a warm relationship with us. God loves us and wants us to love others with that same warmth, affection and presence. Remember, a warm relationship is characterized by listening, being empathetic, caring, loving, acting and speaking with compassion. The Samaritan woman was fetching water and received living water...her salvation from the One who knew her the best and loved her the most. She moved from fear to faith; unloved to loved. And so can you.

In the midst of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic there is no room for fear, but plenty of room for faith. People are wanting to have someone empathize with them in a loving

⁶John 4:15

⁷In the two paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Rebecca Abts Wright, Jane Anne Ferguson, Andrew Nagy-Benson and Michael L. Lindvall as found in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 60-62, 62-63, 71-74 and 74-76.

⁸Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 44.

way. Be authentic like the woman at the well. Remember, your understanding of God is just that... yours. And living it can be a gift to others. Experience Jesus. Show people Jesus. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 15 March 2020
by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in his Study at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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