

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for March 23, 2014 ~ Lent 3A
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Among the loveliest meditation gardens I have ever visited is the one adjacent to the Upper Room Chapel in Nashville, Tennessee. Along with the beautiful flowers and plants, the garden is filled with symbols of Christ's redeeming love in metal and stone works of art. One of the most striking works of art in this garden is the sculpture that depicts Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well (John 4:5-42). It is significant that, as one walks quietly and meditatively about the garden, this particular scene is the last one in the series. In a very natural progression, one recognizes that while all the other things in the garden bear witness to *what Jesus did* and *who he was*, in the encounter with the woman at the well one sees *what he offers* – new life.

Jesus was traveling from Judea to Galilee because, the Scriptures imply, he was not yet ready to become embroiled in a serious controversy with the authorities, whose fears and suspicions had been aroused. The time had not yet come for open confrontation with them. He had other work to do.

It was midday. Jesus was tired and thirsty. He sat down by the well, which tradition says was dug under the direction of the patriarch Jacob. It was a good well and an important well. The women of the village of Sychar relied upon it for water. There they came each day to draw from it. Suddenly one of those women appeared and Jesus asked her for a drink of water.

As she studied his mode of dress and his accent, she saw that he was a Jew. And, due to the bitterness between the Jews and Samaritans since the Babylonian Captivity, she was startled that he would even acknowledge her presence. In the conversation that followed, this woman recognized who Jesus was, saw herself for who she was, and, even more, saw herself for what she could be if she would drink from the water of life that Jesus offered her.

This story is so familiar to us. How often we've read it and thought about it. Yet how fresh and relevant it is in its imagery and message to us as we sit beside the wells of our time longing for the refreshment of a roaring river. Well water is fine. But there is something about running water – it is more effervescent and its thirst-quenching qualities seem greater. Jesus likened the gift of new life to the qualities of such a running stream. To have faith and to drink from the Living Waters of Christ is a transforming experience. Consider with me what it really means to accept this gift.

New life means we are willing to go beyond the land of our ancestors.

This Samaritan woman was concerned over the issues that had divided the Jews and her people, both of whom were children of Abraham. After Jesus had told her what he knew about her life, she said, "I can see, sir, that you are a prophet." Then, she asked him to settle the issue of where true worship occurs. In his answer, Jesus points her beyond the local loyalties of her ancestors who insisted that true worship could only take place on Mt. Gerizim. He points her beyond Jewish authorities who insisted that true worship could only take place in the Jerusalem Temple. He tells her, that the time is even now breaking in upon the present when true worshipers will worship God "in spirit" (new-life-creating power) and it "truth" (the reality of a new existence).

Their forbearer Abraham worshiped in this way: he journeyed in faith away from the land of his ancestors, relying solely on the Living God who was calling and leading him. He could only travel forward because he burned his bridges behind him. Ahead of him lay not only the land of the promise but also the universal significance of his actions for all of the people of the earth. In a sense, the first three verses that describe his leaving the land of his ancestors are the text for the rest of the Bible that follows.

This woman at the well was more concerned about her DNA than about her faith. She relied too heavily upon the accomplishments of her ancestors and, in a sense, they were stagnant. Her life was in shambles. Jesus lifted her eyes to higher aims and challenged her to take up a mode of life that thrusts itself into the future instead of collecting dust as a thing of the past.

There have always been those who believe we should live backwards in time. They believe that the best times of life are in the past. But we see in Abraham and in Jesus Christ that for the person of faith, the greatest hour is always ahead of us.

During the last years of the Nineteenth Century, there was a Bishop of the Evangelical United Brethren Church who went to visit a small college that belonged to that denomination. The President of the college was also a professor of physics. The Bishop, the President, and the faculty spent some time talking about many things during the visit. At some point, the President asked the Bishop, "What do you believe is going to be the greatest step forward in the future?" The Bishop replied, "I believe there will not be many more great discoveries or inventions. Everything humanity needs has already been discovered or invented already."

The young President said, "I believe there will be a great number of new discoveries in the future."

"Name one," demanded the Bishop.

"Well," said the President, "I believe that one day soon men will fly through the air like birds."

The Bishop said, "That's a foolish thought. If God had intended for us to fly, he would have given us wings."

The fascinating thing about this story is that the Bishop's name was Milton Wright and he had two sons named Orville and Wilbur. Those two sons made flying possible, even if it was only 120 feet. They were able to accomplish this because they knew they had to go beyond the life of their father. The old time religion may be good enough for you and me. But it's not good enough for God. God is always demanding that we go beyond the lives of our mothers and fathers. It's not enough to be as good as they were. It's not enough to have the kind of faith they had. We are expected to drink from the river of new life for ourselves and follow God into the future.

New life also means we are willing to let go of our own personal past.

New life can come only to those who are willing to let go of the old life they have been living. Forgiveness can only mean something to those who recognize their sin and are ready to release it and turn away from it. One of my Facebook friends offered this quote from Lily Tomlin the other day, "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past."

That's the challenge Jesus offered to the Samaritan woman. Leave the past behind. Stop drinking from stagnant pools and taste the water of life, which will quench your thirst forever. Before she could drink, she had to put down her empty bucket and let go of her own personal past. Forgiving and accepting forgiveness are so necessary to the reconciliation of which St. Paul speaks in today's Epistle to the Romans (Romans 5:1-11).

Some of you may remember Joe Garagiola as a television personality. Before he was on television, he was one of the great catchers of the game of baseball. One day when Stan Musial was to come to bat, a young pitcher was facing him. Joe gave the signal for a curve ball and the pitcher shook his head. Then he gave the signal for a hard ball. The pitcher shook his head. So, Joe decided that the pitcher wanted to try one of his specialties, so he called for them. Again, the pitcher shook his head. Finally, Joe gave a signal to the Umpire and walked out to the mound for a conference with the pitcher. He said, "I've given you every signal in the book. What do you want to throw?" And this nervous young teammate said, "I don't want to throw anything. I just want to hold on to this ball for as long as I can."

Isn't this the way we are so much of the time? We want to hold on to our personal pasts, our prejudices, our hang-ups, our guilt, and our bitterness. We just want to hold on to the ball! But God wants us to let go, to put our own personal pasts behind us, and receive new life.

New life means that we think of faith not in terms of a destination but as a journey.

We cannot, like the woman, dismiss the great questions and issues and problems of our time on the ground that the Messiah has not yet come. We cannot refuse to act because we cannot act perfectly. We cannot say with the woman, "This is the place I must stay because this is where I had MY revelation." Jesus replies, "Neither in this place nor in Jerusalem." We cannot even say, "Our ancestors got their water – their faith – here in this manner." For the true father of faith is Abraham who erected a shrine everywhere he went, only to leave them behind. We think not of faith as a destination but as a journey because the living God is always on the move.

We cannot always choose the right path. We do not always make the right judgments. We cannot be sure that what we are doing is exactly the right thing. But if we wait until we are absolutely positive, the moment will pass and we will never act.

Ecclesiastes puts it this way, "Whoever watches the wind will never sow. Whoever keeps his eyes on the clouds will never reap." Faith is an action word. Faith that never acts is not faith at all. Faith that amounts to anything is always an ongoing journey with the Living God, whose years are without end.

Robert Louis Stevenson expressed this sentiment beautifully when he wrote, "To travel in hope is better than to arrive." In other words, the most important thing is what happens within you as you travel through life – whether or not you are growing, whether or not you become generous and kind and understanding and forgiving and compassionate toward your traveling companions.

I have been given a copy of a letter from the first Rector of this parish to George Booth. The letter concerns the controversial choice of historical figures for the sculptures on the exterior of the church that would come to be known as "The Dawn Men." In the letter, Dr. Marquis tells Mr. Booth, "Personally, I find it easier to reverence the old than the new. The sight of the first rose that God made would thrill me more than the sight of the last which I hold in my hand. But it ought not to do so. Both are from His hand. The fault is in me that the last does not thrill me as the first. Belief in God is always in the past tense. It ought to be in the present."

Back in the 1950's when people in this country were living in fear of nuclear war, they were building bomb shelters. A reporter who was interviewing poet Robert Frost asked him if he had ever thought of building one. Mr. Frost said, "Well, I had not thought about it but I suppose if we are compelled to do so I will. But if we die, we'll all die in good company."

The reporter asked, "But wouldn't it be a terrible thing and isn't it bad to live without a future to believe in?"

Robert Frost replied, "I want you to know something and to remember it; the founders of this country did not believe in the future; they believed the future in."

That's exactly the spirit we need to catch today. Those of us who drink the water of new life in Christ are compelled to act toward the future, to believe the future in. It takes faith to move beyond the lives of our ancestors and to move beyond our own past experiences. It's the sort of faith that the future depends upon. This is the mark of those who drink from the waters of new life and who bring new life to the world. God alone gives this water and God has demonstrated that he can provide it anywhere we may be, even from a rock in the middle of a desert (Exodus 17:1-7).