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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Third Sunday in Lent  
March 15, 2020

Lectionary Year A; John 4:5-42

Of all the fasts I could think of for the season of Lent, this has to be one of the most unusual. The Coronavirus pandemic has put us in a position where public worship is not advised, and that is the reason why most of this morning's congregation is a "virtual" one. If there's anything to be thankful for during this difficult time, it might be the gift of technology that allows this service to be broadcast via live streaming video so that Sunday morning can retain some semblance of normalcy.

Those gathered to join in the singing the hymns and saying the responses are here -- thankfully -- to make the service a little less awkward. I apologize to those who felt that this may have been a slight, because, obviously, one could interpret it as an exclusion of those who would've liked to have been here. I hope that the option of viewing the service online is the best possible compromise amid these extraordinary circumstances. On the other hand, there are members of our congregation who are currently self-quarantining, and they are relieved to know that they don't have to endanger their health by venturing out into public.

An early episode of M\*A\*S\*H, entitled The Army-Navy Game, finds the 4077th in a panic over an unexploded bomb in the middle of the compound. Of course, amid the insanity of war -- and with the possibility of even greater carnage with a bomb right there -- main characters like Hawkeye and Trapper employ their usual quirky coping mechanisms, including, in this episode, a rather high-stakes game of poker. Trapper, confused about the valuation of the poker chips, asks, "Wait

a minute...the blues are worth five thousand dollars or ten thousand dollars?" Hawkeye snaps back, "For the last time, the whites are worth five thousand dollars, the blues are worth ten thousand dollars, the reds are worth twenty-five thousand dollars." A bit later, Trapper then asks, "By the way, what happens if the bomb doesn't go off?" Hawkeye answers, "Then the whites are worth twenty-five cents, the blues are worth fifty cents, and the reds are worth a dollar."

As our nation tries to find its way through the current crisis, it becomes all the more important to do so with flexibility, perspective, and, of course, humor. We know that the "bomb," so to speak, will either go off...or it won't. My hopes, naturally, are that the latter will be the case, and that, in a few weeks, we'll be able to gather for worship as we normally do. In the meantime, we lift up our prayers and we remember, especially during this season, the path toward the cross that our Savior Christ took. With this being the season of Lent, we see vividly how God, through Jesus Christ, enters into the very real sufferings of humanity, and does so not necessarily to "fix" everything, but rather to accompany those whose pains, diseases, and struggles have, for whatever reason, been overlooked or gone unnoticed. Jesus is walking the way of the cross with us right now, pouring out his compassion and suffering right alongside us, so that we might endure through the current turmoil and receive the glorious hope granted in the Resurrection.

Remember...Lent is always followed by Easter!

We observe the cycles of the liturgical calendar to remind ourselves of precisely this -- that an Easter dawn always follows a Good Friday. Over and over again, we are refreshed and renewed by both the fast of Lent and the feast of Easter. Through this refreshment and renewal, we receive Christ himself, who,

in this morning's Gospel text, says that "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" (John 4:14a). Needless to say, we are in a very thirsty world right now...one that thirsts because it doesn't seem to know either the Cross or the Resurrection and hence the Paschal Mystery of Christ himself. The term Paschal Mystery refers to Christ's passage from the grave and gates of death into eternal life, and, of all things, this mystery is celebrated most vividly with water in Holy Baptism. In Baptism, we put the old self to death by drowning it in water, and from that water a new self rises to life in the Resurrection. Christ himself says, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14b).

So, I ask, "Where is that spring of water gushing up to eternal life in us?" A quick answer might be, "In the covenant God established with us in Holy Baptism." In Baptism, we have been claimed by God as a child of God forever. Because of that, a spring of water will be gushing up in us until our baptismal journey is completed, when our Lord calls us back to him at the end of our earthly existence. How can we be "thirsty" knowing this? There is so much assurance, especially in times of turmoil, to be had in knowing that there is one thing in us that will never run out. So now, it is of utmost importance for us to grab that baptismal promise and hold on tight, because there is nothing else in this world that will give us the same assurance and comfort.

This morning's Gospel text, I must mention, is the rather lengthy discourse between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, which is followed by the entrance of the disciples and more Samaritans on top of that. As we well know, there's enough going on in this text for at least a dozen sermons, and, as you have noticed, I chose to approach it from a baptismal angle. But, as we are worshipping this morning in unusual circumstances, it might not be a bad idea to

dig into the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman regarding worship. For the Samaritan people, their holy place of worship is Mount Gerizim, which means that when a Samaritan woman encounters a Jew like Jesus, she is going to realize one thing right away (in addition to the unprecedented interaction between herself and a Jew), and that is the difference in their respective holy places. She says, "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20). But Jesus approaches the matter completely differently; the place has nothing to do with the authenticity of the worship. Jesus says, "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him" (John 4:23). Thus, we ask the question, "Must we gather in the designated holy place to worship?"

Amid the current circumstances, the answer would have to be, "No!"

Whether you're among the few here in the sanctuary here at St. Anne's this morning or among the many joining us online, we are all worshiping the Father in spirit and truth. Back when he said those words, Jesus was inaugurating what eventually became the Christian Church, where the holy place was not fixed (as was the case with the Jerusalem temple until 70 A.D.), but rather anywhere two or three or more happened to gather together. In its history, St. Anne's is known for worshiping in unusual places, including the bar of the Hotel Hays when it started as a mission back in 1950. So I hope it isn't too much of a stretch to do what we're doing this morning...

And above all, our worshiping in spirit and truth is grounded in the baptismal water that I was talking about earlier. Only something that is permanent, like a baptismal covenant, can be the basis of our worship, because it is from those

those waters that our new selves emerge as sanctified and purified to give thanks to God for all he has done. Particularly in these times when we might be more inclined to lament rather than give thanks, we rejoice nonetheless in the bond with Christ that we shall have forever, and even in our deepest depths of lamentation, we know that our Crucified Savior is right there with us. Our pains, diseases, and struggles never are overlooked or go unnoticed by Jesus.

Yes, people are thirsty right now, and, while I refuse to resort to platitudes like "Jesus can quench every thirst," I can say that there is something unique about the assurance granted through the permanence of our bond with Christ.

This is something that can never be undone; indeed, through pandemics, plagues, famines, trials, tribulations, pestilence, and war, we have that eternal covenant that will outlast everything, for our God is more faithful than the Coronavirus is virulent. Drink now of the water of God's faithfulness, for you will never be thirsty; this, along with Christ by your side, will carry you through.

Amen.