

March 19, 2017  
Third Sunday in Lent

“What God Promises”

John 4:5-26

What kind of life does this woman at the well have the day before she meets Jesus? The details aren't included in the text, but I have my own picture of things. Assuming she stuck to the same routine, she came to this well in the middle of the day and drew her water in its high heat because she was ostracized by the rest of this community. They thought her an immoral adulteress five times divorced and now living with a man out of wedlock. She didn't come in the cool morning because she didn't want to deal with harsh stares or worse coming from the other “acceptable” women. And then she went back home not because she wanted to, but because she was desperate. She'd been used and tossed aside by five husbands and she clung to this current abusive loser not because she loved him, but because he was the only thing that kept her from homelessness and starvation. I see her as desperate and hopeless.

But four days later, what was her life like? John's Gospel doesn't tell us anything at all about that, but I'm quite sure it was different. Did she suddenly have the means to live on her own without clinging to a lout? I doubt it. Had her past been erased and no one would ever look at her with those accusing stares? No. Was her life all suddenly puppies and daffodils now? No. The fact is maybe not a whole lot changed with her earthly situation. It may have gotten worse. She may have gone back home and in repentance informed that guy that she couldn't live this way anymore and he said “Don't let the door hit you on the behind on the way out!” and she found herself homeless.

But was she hopeless? No.

She has met the Messiah. She has received the water the Messiah gives that makes one never thirsty forever; the water welling up to eternal life. Whatever her situation she has the hope of one who has been made right with God. She has hope beyond the “guilty” judgment of death in this life and into the “not guilty” judgment of eternal life.

This water is the Holy Spirit who enables her, and each one of us to know the truth: We're broken people leading broken lives afflicted by the evils of both the broken world in which we live and those within our own flesh and psyche...BUT...the Messiah is the Messiah; the one who takes away the sins of the world. Knowing and believing this, the Messiah sees us through the brokenness to everlasting unbroken life. The living water Jesus brings gives the present reality of certain hope which is now and not yet, the kingdom of heaven.

But the point I really want to make here is that for this woman everything has changed...and nothing has changed. In being brought to saving faith by Christ she now enjoys the wondrous hope and peace which passes all understanding and perfect life in God's presence forever. But after Jesus leaves town, eventually dies on the cross and rises from the dead and then ascends to the Father's side, she's still living in Sychar. She's still a Samaritan, shunned by proper Jewish society. She's still “that woman who has been dumped by five husbands.” She very well may be struggling to survive day to day, a shunned woman—the lowest rung of such a male dominated culture. Who knows? She may have starved to death.

But however it happened, she dies...and that's fine. Having the water Christ gives is faith in Christ that makes one never be thirsty forever; a spring of water welling up to eternal life. That changes everything forever, even in the midst of a world where nothing of one's earthly situation seems to change.

We need to remember what it is that Jesus promises: *“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*

That’s a great, great promise, and it is one that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, sustains us through broken lives in a broken world. And I kind of feel like a broken record lately, but it keeps jumping out at me when I look up from the biblical text to what I see and hear Christians seeking in the world; we need to stop thinking it’s God’s job to make us happy!

The promise is forgiveness. The promise is peace with God. The promise is never ever that you will have a decent job, wonderful spouse, obedient children, easy classes and wonderful teachers, victorious sports teams, vibrant health culminating in a death that only happens when you’re darn good and ready for it!

This woman at the well has joy, yes! It is joy in the certain hope of eternal life. That joy endures even though, if by the world’s standards, her life still stinks. There are Christians today worshipping in fear, fleeing from their homes and dying in the streets. Their lives are not happy. But the Holy Spirit given them keeps them clinging to the cross of Christ. So even in the midst of horrible unhappiness, they have the joy of certain hope—that within them Christ dwells; the spring of water welling up to eternal life. This too, however bad it gets, will pass...and then it’s going to be great!

When I preach this truth I always feel like I have to put in a disclaimer that it’s okay to ask earthly gifts of God; He tells us to do so. We should seek happiness in this life—that God allows His sinful and rebellious humanity any measure of happiness in our fallen life is His gracious gift! But that’s not His promise. He tried a promise like that over and over with that nation of Israel, and they continually turned away from it; eventually destroyed it.

No, the promise that endures for us is only forgiveness, life and salvation. Everything else is simply lagniappe. Our hope is not in the lagniappe. Our hope is in the promise fulfilled and fulfilled forever in Christ.

Personally, I don’t think this woman at the well had a horrible life after this. If you keep reading, this woman tells the whole community about Jesus. Christ ends up hanging out for two days and John writes, *“And many more believed because of his word.”* These say to the woman, *“We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.”*

The Holy Spirit works through the Word. Jesus’ Word gives these folks the water welling up to eternal life. It changed them. I’m sure it worked repentance and forgiveness in their hearts. I bet that a few years later the Word came to them again, revealing the death and resurrection victory and having these folks again rejoice: *“This is indeed the Savior of the world.”* I think they were baptized into Christ and again received the gift of the Spirit. I think they celebrated the Lord’s Supper together and rejoiced in their forgiveness. I think this community lived and died in joyful, certain hope of their resurrection in Jesus.

And I like to think that, being Christ’s church, the Holy Spirit worked community and this woman found love and fellowship among her brothers and sisters of the faith. Maybe even the guy she was living with came to faith and became a god-fearing husband to her.

But I don’t think they lived happily ever after, because that is not God’s promise in this world. I know that war or famine or want or hunger or disease or sickness or injury or age afflicted them. I know that death came, because this world is broken. Any happiness they found would be interrupted.

But having the water Jesus gives, I trust they had the same joy as you and I. The joy that can see beyond the tragedies and into the standing victory of Christ. Though this world pass away, the happiness we thirst for is and will be ours forever, because that, my friend, is the promise of God.

Amen.

