



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Open to Wisdom and Grace” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

March 15, 2020; Third Sunday in Lent

Readings: John 4:5-24; “The Fountain” by Denise Levertov

What a difference a few days make. Just last week I was comparing the bronze serpent from the Book of Numbers with empty Costco shelves, noting how they are both symbols of communal angst. While I stand by my assessment that empty shelves highlight the growing disconnection we experience in our world, with this week’s WHO declaration that we’re facing a pandemic, I can see empty shelves with greater compassion, seeing both the desire of people to take care of their families and the genuine fear we feel in a time of uncertainty. Part of our fear is fuelled by isolation. As social beings, in times like this we need community support and reassurance. This is a conundrum given that one of the ways we need to protect each other is with social distance.

Social distance is also at play in our scriptures last week and today. In these adjoining chapters of John we eavesdrop on two conversations. Last week’s was initiated by Nicodemus, an influential Pharisee whose prejudgement seemed to erect barriers between him and Jesus at every turn. In contrast, the second conversation was initiated by Jesus with an unnamed Samaritan woman at a well near Sychar. Understandably shocked that he spoke with her given not only the historical enmity between Judeans and Samaritans but the culturally constructed divide between women and men, every barrier that could have been between them fell away. Consider how her address of Jesus shifts through their encounter. While the passage we heard is just the first half of the meeting, overall her assertions move from calling Jesus a Jew to “sir” to prophet to messiah to saviour of the world. What I hear is greater openness not just to who Jesus is but who she is in relationship with him.

The assertion of world saviour is offered second hand by those who come to see Jesus after she went to tell everyone about him. Unlike Nicodemus who becomes at best a secret disciple, she is effectively an apostle. That is the designation she is given in the Orthodox Church where she’s also known as Photini, the enlightened. She’s reputed to have travelled with her sisters and sons far and wide sharing the good news, even going to Rome where the emperor’s daughter became a Christian through her preaching. While there are fantastical details to the legend, it highlights how well regarded she is among Eastern Christians, celebrating how she shared with others the divine relationship she gained. It’s a shame she is still unnamed in Western Christianity. In contrast to the East, we marginalise her beyond culture and gender, as preachers, trying to figure out why she and Jesus met at noon, assume she was ostracized by her community, jumping from the statement about five husbands to claim she was a prostitute. The fact we still conclude that is a reminder of how far we still have to go to reach equality for women. Perhaps they meet at noon to highlight her as Photini, that is to affirm her spiritual openness. In the light of day she came to full awareness not just of who Jesus is, but who she is, and the relationship they share in grace.

This is where an often overlooked detail comes in. The significance of the well. This is a holy place, close to Mt. Gerizim where Samaritans worshipped G-d. It was Jacob's Well. According to tradition, a bucket wasn't needed to draw water in his lifetime. Water rose to the surface when needed. Similarly, Jesus offered Photini living water, an internal spring of grace, of wisdom that she could access, that we all can access, not just in the Temple or on Mt. Gerizim, but anywhere, in spirit and truth. Throughout Torah, wells are places of potential marriage. Isaac, Jacob, Moses all met their future wives at the well. At this well, Jesus offers mystical marriage, divine union that brings new life. As he is one with the Source of All Things, he offers to her the same.

We are offered divine union as well. Denise Levertov speaks to this in "The Fountain". The spring gushing from the rock wall has a guardian. She frowns, not because she is protecting the fountain but wants those who come to it to drink all they can. This is something we are called to do this Lent and beyond. We need to seek the grace and wisdom that will bring solace to our hearts, even in this time of crisis, perhaps because it is a time of crisis. In a recent TV report on the virus, I was surprised when a doctor suggested that social distancing and other restrictions may have a benefit. He wondered aloud what we'll do with simplified schedules, with more time with family or on our own. Then on another program a presenter suggested we unplug for a time because we can become saturated by information. This can heighten rather than lessen anxiety. She then suggested we set time aside for meditation. I was not expecting this advice from the two presenters but it makes sense to me. I find the promise Jesus offers Photini reassuring, a reminder that we all have the wisdom and strength we need within us. We're used to spending more time at church during Lent. Perhaps this year as worship is suspended and programs shut down, we can take more time for personal quiet and reflection, for walks in the forest like I did with Finley (where I might add I ended up seeing a lot more people than usual, perhaps they saw the same presenters), take time to read poems, contemplate scripture. Each Lent is a time to nurture the union Jesus offers. We need that right now, to tap into the inner reserves he promises we have.

That being said, we can take too much personal time. Over time the isolation will take a toll. And so even as we use social distancing as a way to keep each other healthy, we need to find ways to reach out, connecting by phone, sending an email, logging online for worship. We are reworking our webs as a phone tree to help us stay connected. We need to look after each other, and why wouldn't we? The union with the Source of All Things Jesus offered Photini, that we experience personally, is something we all share. As a relationship grew between Jesus and Photini, it does so with all of us. We all draw from the same wisdom, making us family. As we face this crisis, we continue to be. May we be patient with each other and offer compassion, even with distance.

Friends, this is a difficult time. Many feel anxious and unsure. Understandably. Isolation isn't easy. But we will get through this. We have the capacities we need both within us, and as we support one another. As we continue on our Lenten retreat, may we draw on the promise of inner wisdom and may we reach out to each other, continue to be community even though we're apart. Amen.