

March 15, 2020
John 4:5-42

The Third Sunday in Lent

Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Alone

I have been a pastor for 17 and a half years. And this is a first. I have never cancelled the public gathering of my community of faith for worship on a Sunday before. I have never closed the doors of my church on a Sunday morning before. There are times when, due to snow, I probably should have. We have a policy in place for us to do that now, in case of a blizzard that takes place on a Sunday morning. We made that policy after the storm when I probably should have formally cancelled worship. There have been times when no one showed up, again, because of snow. But I have never needed to put our snow cancellation policy into effect. So, this is a first. And I hate it.

I hate it for practical reasons. I hate it because it is exponentially more complicated to cancel things than it is to have them.

I hate it because I love worship. I love singing hymns of praise in a community of faith. I love receiving communion and I love distributing it. I love praying the concerns of the community with my sisters and brothers in faith. For my whole life, beginning long before I was a pastor, community worship has been the center of my life of faith. It has guided the ebb and flow of my days and weeks. It has given me a family even at times and in place when I was far away from my own family. It has formed me a Christian and helped to give me a deep and sustaining connection to God.

And more than loving worship, I love gathering with this specific community of faith, you, good people of Emmanuel, who have become my family of faith, with whom I have shared joys and sorrows, laughter and tears. It is strange not to be with you today, not to hear your voices, not to see your smiles, not to shake your hands or give you a hug. It is strange and it is hard and I hate it.

And of course, this is Lent, which is my favorite season of the church year. Can you guess why Lent is one of my favorite seasons of the church year? Did anyone guess that it's because Lent is a time when the communities of faith with which I have been a part, have had an additional opportunity to gather for worship. If you guessed that, then you're right. Mid-week Lenten worship has been a huge part of my life for most of my life. I don't need to say much more about it than that it has been another time to worship, and that has always been a blessing to me.

Most of the time I would affirm what is said in the book of Genesis, "It is not good for the human being to be alone."

But, of course, it seems that at least for this Sunday and perhaps for more Sundays, with fears of pandemic and the high risk of complications or death for people who are particularly vulnerable, it seems that right now it is not good for the human beings to be together. And as much as I hate it, I believe that it is our responsibility as people of faith to sacrifice something that we love and that we value and that helps to give our lives focus and meaning, for the sake of the larger community, for the well-being of our neighbors, and as good stewards of our own health.

This strange Lenten Sunday fast from worship has caused me to take a second look at our gospel reading assigned or today and for the other Sundays in Lent. As you might imagine, I have preached on these texts many times in my years as a pastor. But this year, I noticed something that I have never noticed before. I noticed that "being alone" have featured prominently in our gospel readings thus far in Lent.

On the first Sunday of Lent we heard the story from the gospel of Matthew of Jesus being alone in the wilderness. He fasted for forty days and forty nights and then he was tempted by the devil. He probably felt very alone, and yet, when he needed them, the words of scripture came to him and gave him the strength, the wisdom that he needed to withstand the devil's temptations.

Last Sunday, the second Sunday of Lent, we heard the story of Nicodemus, avoiding the crowds around Jesus and avoiding the scorn or suspicion of his fellow religious leaders by coming to Jesus at night. Nicodemus tracked Jesus down at night so that he could be alone with him. During that alone time with Jesus, Jesus spoke to Nicodemus and challenged him. He gave him a new way of looking at God and at faith.

Today we meet the Samaritan woman at the well. And she is socially distanced. She enters the gospel story coming alone to the well, at noon, in the heat of the day.

These days, she's a lot like all of us. Following the recommendations of health professionals who tell us to perform necessary tasks at times when we are unlikely to encounter other people, performing the same necessary tasks, to avoid getting sick or unknowingly spreading infection.

But the Samaritan woman did not go to the well at noon because of fear of disease. She went to the well alone at an inconvenient time because she was not welcome to go to the well when the other women did. Most women would have gone to the well in the morning, when it was cool, and so that they would have adequate water for their daily tasks, water for cooking and drinking, water for washing, water for cleaning. It probably would have been a bit of a social time, a time for the women in the community to reconnect with each other, to check in on each other's children, to share the news, to give each other support and advice.

But the woman who met Jesus at the well that noontime, was not welcome to be a part of that gathering of women. She was socially distanced, because her lifestyle transgressed the moral code of her community. She was a woman whose life had been marked by bad luck, by broken dreams, and by desperation. She was living with a man she was not married to, and that made her a scandal in her community. And Jesus knew it. He met her at the well, he spoke to her, making himself a scandal as well since men were not supposed to speak to unknown women and Jews were not supposed to speak to Samaritans, and he engaged her

in a discussion about the history of the Jewish people and blessings and promises of God.

This woman, whose defining characteristic was estrangement from her community, was her isolation, her sense that she didn't fit and didn't belong, found that the Messiah, the source of the living water of God, who makes all things clean and new, who refreshes and restores, speaking to her, blessing her, and making her the bearer of his word to her community, the community that had left her alone.

If the Samaritan woman had been just one of the girls, going to the well in the cool of the morning, with the other women of her community, she would have missed this encounter with Jesus. Her very aloneness made it possible for her to meet Jesus in an extraordinary way.

Most of the time I emphasize all of the ways that we encounter Jesus in community. Because we do. When we gather for any reason, we do so as the body of Christ and we encounter the presence of Jesus in each other. We share the peace of Christ with one another. We share the presence of Jesus in bread and wine together. Jesus comes to us in the word, when we hear scriptures read and proclaimed. When we sing together the Holy Spirit moves in and through us. We know that Jesus is reliably present with and to us when we are together.

But Jesus can also come to us when we are alone and gives us his blessing in extraordinary ways.

I still don't like being alone this Sunday, worshiping without my community of faith. But of course, I'm not alone. Because, the witness of scripture, particularly our readings this Lent, and the witness of my own life, and the witness of stories that I have heard people tell recently and not so recently remind me that we are never alone. That wherever we are, whatever we're doing, Jesus is with us. And when we're afraid, when we feel abandoned, when the communities that we have come to count on, can't function the way that we're used to them functioning, because of some sort of crisis, whether it comes from

the inside or the outside, there is one thing that will never fail us. That is the presence of Jesus in our lives. Jesus who comes to help, to assure, to comfort, to encourage, to challenge, to call, to love, to bless.

So, during this time, when we cannot be together, as the body of Christ, I encourage you to be open to all of the other ways that Jesus might come to you. Because if this Lent has taught me nothing else, at least so far, it has taught me that sometimes, it is when we are alone that Jesus can come to us and give us good news that fills us, that surprises us, that sustains us, that changes our lives. Until we meet again, thanks be to God. Amen.