

“A New Way of Being Church”

John 4:5-42

Part IV of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Creator God, your Word is the rock beneath our feet, a firm foundation for our lives. Send us your Holy Spirit to be our guide and our light of understanding as we listen for your wisdom this day in the name of Jesus Christ, your Living Word. Amen.

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Beloved People of God,

Today is the first day of a new way of life for most of us. We gather this morning in a new way, with most of you at home and listening to our podcast at a later time. You are with us in spirit as just a few gather here at First Congregational Church to lead worship. We are here out of our due diligence and necessary caution for community containment of this COVID-19 pandemic. We find ourselves in search of sure footing in anxious times.

We come this morning
to find community in a new way
to pray for those whose lives have been lost
to find encouragement for our life together
to lean into words of scripture
to remember the unwavering promises of God.

We are living in a cultural moment completely unprecedented in the modern era. The spread of COVID-19, also known as the coronavirus, has resulted in many firsts: a look into the fascinating and challenging world of Public Health with new words for our vocabulary like “social distancing.” Our beloved sporting events have been cancelled, the closure of schools and colleges mid semester, the lights have gone dark on theater and musical productions, in-person worship cancelled, and economic unpredictability across nearly every industry and category.

And yet, people of God.

Today, in this moment and in all the moments to come, God is with us.

The Prophet Isaiah reminds us of the assurance of God: “Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be afraid, for I am your God” (Isaiah 41:10).

Today, let’s also remember, that:

Love has not been cancelled.

Mercy has not been cancelled.

Prayer has not been cancelled.

Hope has not been cancelled.

The command to love our neighbors as Christ loved us will not be cancelled.¹

Our Lenten series on Christianity 101 couldn’t get more real than this.

The worldwide transmission of the coronavirus is a reminder that despite technical and scientific advances, there is so much we do

not know and so much we cannot control. We are reminded of our fragility and our dependence on one another and our dependence on God.

I need to stress that while it's important to remain vigilant and alert to potential dangers from this virus, we must continue to trust in God through all developments, remaining calm in a time of distress, extending compassion to those who are suffering, and praying for the healing of the world (Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, USA).

Just as the Israelites who thirst for water in the desert, in the midst of our uncertainty and ever evolving information, we too might ask, "Is God really with us or not?" (Exodus 17:7 NRSV). Let's remember in that story, as Moses hits the rock at Horeb with the shepherd's rod, water comes out of the rock and the people drink of that water. God shows up in the most desolate of places and offers what they need most.

You know, God has a habit of showing up in the most desolate, the darkest and the lowest moments of our lives. In John Chapter 4, when the Samaritan woman comes to draw water at Jacob's well at midday, she encounters Jesus. Jesus sees her and doesn't reject her. Things have not been good for the woman. The woman comes to the well at a time when no one else is there.

The disciples have gone into the city to get food. Jesus asks for a drink of water from her. She has the good sense to object. "You know better than that. You're not supposed to have anything to do with me" (John 4:9). He says the well water she seeks will not

satisfy. But the water Jesus offers will sustain her. Jesus offers living water that gushes up into eternal life.

The woman says, “Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty.” That’s when Jesus asks about her husband. He goes straight for her circumstances, her most vulnerable point in her life, not to hurt her, but to free her. She recognizes the one who speaks to her is the One for whom they have waited. In that moment, the woman’s life changes.

Watch a cascading waterfall or a flowing stream. Water always finds the lowest point. Living water finds a crack in the woman’s defenses and trickles down to her lowest point, her deepest wound, her greatest need. With Jesus she feels known and loved and accepted. God’s grace surprises her, refreshes her, heals her. She relaxes and sets down her water jar. In our story, she goes to the city to offer good news, and leaves that heavy jar behind!

God’s living water finds our lowest point. The place of our greatest need, the site of our deepest fear. God’s living water flows to our wound; to that raw place that just can’t seem to heal.

Jesus knows, forgives, loves. Living water quenches our spiritual thirst in a way nothing else can.

Whatever your lowest point is right now, whatever your greatest fear, the living water of God’s compassion can find you, is finding you, will find you.²

Out of that same compassion, we are being asked to help others stay safe. Follow scientific recommendations for washing hands, not touching your face. Limit travel and being in large crowds. We all are being asked to play a role in this to help others, the most vulnerable among us, to stay safe.

This moment of worry around Covid-19 is an opportunity for our Christian witness in our lives. It is a new chapter in Christianity 101...its title is “Be the Church.”

It’s a phrase we have used here at First Church before. We’ve shared banners and bumper stickers. *“Be the Church. Protect the environment. Forgive often. Reject racism. Fight for the powerless. Share earthly and spiritual resources. Embrace Diversity. Love God. Enjoy this life.”*

When we posted our “Be the Church” banners on Broad Street and Gay Streets last year, people would stop all the time to pose and take selfies with them. It was a way to be a Christian witness in the world and proclaim how we are the Church.

Today, we have new words and I encourage you to add your own. What does it mean to “Be the Church” in March of 2020 and beyond, when few are inside the walls of the sanctuary and many of you are at home.

Maybe our new phrases to add to our banner at this time are:

- Flatten the curve
- Wash your hands
- Maintain social distancing

- Check on your neighbors
- Pray for your community of faith
- Offer food to those in need
- Be flexible
- Be creative
- Be generous

What is your phrase for “Be the Church?” Post them on Facebook or text us after you hear this podcast and we’ll post them.

In these times, we are called to be creative in our ministry. Many of you have already made yourselves known to us, as you are willing to step in and connect in new ways. And we can’t thank you enough. Here at the church we are going to care creatively for each other. We are strengthening our interconnectedness, because we have to, we need to. We are going to meet differently, pray differently, worship differently, serve differently, and give differently.

If you are willing to be part of this caring connection, let us know. Write a note, or make a phone call, or deliver a meal to a doorstep, this is all part of Being the Church, differently. We’ll pair you up with someone in the congregation. If you are willing to be part of this caring connection, please let us know so we can support one another.

In the early centuries after Jesus’ death, (third century), two massive plagues swept through the Roman Empire. Contemporary accounts suggest they devastated cities and social

networks, affecting Christians and non-Christians alike. However, the responses of the Christians and the non-Christians to these plagues could not have been more different.

Contemporary accounts indicate that non-Christians “...pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the road...hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.” Christians, on the other hand, with the faith imparted to them, did something radically—literally “at the root”—different: “Most of our brother [and sister]-Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another,” an act borne out of this then-unique Christian perspective, “...there is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attentions of love, but that one might become perfect who should do something more than heathen ones or publican, one who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a merciful kindness like that of God, should love one’s enemies as well...thus good was done to all, not merely to the household of faith.”³

Later, the pagan emperor Julian, watching the reaction of the populace to the Christian and non-Christian responses to these plagues, even went so far as to tell the pagan priests of the empire that they must do better, lest the Christian faith eclipse them and take hold.⁴

Our Christian faith did take hold and it did spread around the world. Communities of faith through generations celebrate the redeeming and life-giving waters found in Jesus Christ.

This past week, I've been thinking a lot about community. Our community and others around the world. I had to smile when I think of new communities as I watched video after video of people of Italy on their balconies this week. In the middle of a country wide quarantine, Italians found the way to be community---singing their national anthem, playing the tambourines and laughing in the middle of such isolation. In those desolate and dark moments there was God. Ready to spring forth with living water of laughter and hope.

All of us who feel comfortable to do something are invited do something. Remember the 50,000 Columbus Public School children who will have decreased access to daily meals. Volunteer at your polling station for Tuesday's election because it's not safe for the more vulnerable to be there. Remember the two income families with children now with a three-week break from school.

Remember the hourly wage workers who were told their hours are cut back. Remember the local small business owner. Pray for those with little to health care.

We are on a new road on our Christian journey. We are learning new ways of connecting and being safe. This is not church as usual. We are throwing out the playbook, but certainly, not the Good Book. With God's Living Water, we will learn to live life with more flexibility and with more creativity and with more generosity to all who are in need.

This time in our life calls us to be our best selves. We are, with God's help, doing all this together as people who are followers of

Jesus. For now, being Christian and being helpful means keeping yourself safe. It means helping keep another life safe and another and another. And that is enough. That, dear brothers and sisters, is our new Lenten Journey. And that is Holy Work.⁵

¹The Rev. Sarah Juist in a fabulous post to her community of faith on March 14, 2020.

² *With gratitude* for a portion offered by Rev. Ann Palmerton, used with permission.

³ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, (1997).

⁴*With thanks to the various sources that have been raising awareness of early Christian history and public health of late; and Rev. Will Shurley's Facebook post to remind me of this powerful example.

⁵With gratitude for a post from Rev. Dr. Nancy Livingston's friend, Cindy Bump.